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पुस्तकालय गुरुकुल कांगड़ी विश्वविद्यालय, हरिद्वार

वर्ग संख्या.....

आगत संख्या.....

पुस्तक-विवरण की तिथि नीचे अंकित है । इस तिथि सहित ३० वे दिन तक यह पुस्तक पुस्तकालय में वापिस आ जानी चाहिए । अन्यथा ५० पैसे प्रति दिन के हिसाब से विलम्ब-दण्ड लगेगा ।

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Complete



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WENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

A SCHOLARLY AND
CRITICAL JOURNAL

Essays on

Robert Frost

Virginia Woolf

Louis Auchincloss

Iris Murdoch

Flannery O'Connor

Gabriel García Márquez

Samuel Beckett

VOLUME 38

SPRING 1992

NUMBER

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The name of Bryant N. Wyatt was misspelled in the Spring 1992 issue of *TCL*. We apologize for the error.

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The Promethean Frost

GEORGE F. BAGBY

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.

The familiar Frost is far from Promethean. He is “playful,” defensive and ironic, moderate in his claims. For him, as one critic puts it, “guarded epiphanies are more than enough”; he practices “resignation to the gravitational pull of a given reality which confines our will” (Bradford 277). This Frost not only recognizes but respects, even venerates, the natural world: although it may sometimes threaten the human viewer (“A Leaf-Treader,” “Once by the Pacific”), he feels a deep affection for it born of long familiarity, cherishes his ties to it (“Birches,” “The Silken Tent”), and rejects the Blakean or Emersonian tendency to transcend it (“Bond and Free”). For Richard Wilbur, “Love calls us to the things of this world”; so, for the familiar Frost, “Earth’s the right place for love” and “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.”

To call this Frost Promethean—to align him with Blake and Byron and Shelley, with Emerson and Stevens, in making certain extreme claims for the power of spirit or imagination and the relative insignificance of the natural world—would surely seem oxymoronic. Yet it is true that, alongside the familiar and dominant Frost, there is a Promethean Frost who appears in a number of interesting poems—interesting both for what they show us of a remarkably imperial side of Frost’s imagination and for their relationship with the dominant, more accommodating side.

“Kitty Hawk” is not a great poem, yet it seems to me a genuinely startling work to have been written by Frost, perhaps especially when he

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was eighty years old. It is an unusual piece in many respects: one of Frost's longest poems; one of the dozen or so most important pieces from the last two volumes; surprisingly innovative metrically, working within the tight limitations of the short lines and repeated rhymes of its "three-beat phrases"; and, most remarkably, a radical assertion of the power of mind.

In its fiction, "Kitty Hawk" recounts past and present visits by the poet to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Part One recalls his first visit to the Kitty Hawk area, in November 1894, when Elinor White had cast the young poet into despair by refusing (temporarily, of course) to marry him. Part Two is set nearly sixty years later, when the speaker returns to Kitty Hawk in 1953 on the fiftieth anniversary of the Wright brothers' flight.¹ Part Two, pondering the historical associations of Kitty Hawk, is an extended, often remarkable celebration of western technological thought and achievement—a celebration which, if unexpected in the middle of the twentieth century, nonetheless echoes Emerson's approval of scientific conquest at several points in the 1836 *Nature* and elsewhere.² Frost goes so far as to suggest that the Wright brothers' pioneering flight is a synecdoche for the entire history of civilization (ll. 258-95), and concludes the poem with a thanksgiving to the "God of the machine, / Peregrine machine." Rewriting Genesis, Frost suggests that God must not altogether condemn the Fall—"Our instinctive venture / Into . . . / The material"³—since it only parallels, in human terms, the Incarnation:

. . . God's own descent
 Into flesh was meant
 As a demonstration
 That the supreme merit
 Lay in risking spirit
 In substantiation.

Here again Frost's stance follows Emerson, who notes in *Nature* that "There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms" (*Collected Works* 1:22). Such an argument, which might at first glance seem materialistic, in fact stands simplistic materialism on its head; the celebration of "substantiation" is, on the contrary, a radical assertion of the pre-eminence of mind or spirit. It assumes, in Blakean or Stevensian fashion, that material nature is barren unless redeemed by human possession: only mind, acting "Like a kitchen spoon / Of a size Titanic," can "keep all things stirred" and thus vital. (The homey tropes which Frost uses here, reminiscent of Edward Taylor, underline

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the domestication of nature by man; but "Titanic" is surely meant to remind us of Prometheus.) Without such mental stirring, nature is stagnant and moribund: "Matter musn't curd, / Separate and settle. / Action is the word." Only mind, here seen primarily in its scientific aspect, can transform the "waste" of infinite space into a human habitation. Through aviation

We have made a pass
At the infinite,
Made it, as it were,
Rationally ours,
To the most remote
Swirl of neon-lit
Particle afloat.
Ours was to reclaim
What had long been faced
As a fact of waste
And was waste in name.

To "conquer" nature is not to defeat but to fulfill it. As for Blake and Milton, man is intended to be the ruler over creation; it is his proper task to name the natural world and to order it with mind—"to master Nature / By some nomenclature." Because nature is barren and meaningless in itself, it waits for human intellectual control to transform and fulfill it. Echoing "The Aim Was Song," Frost suggests that technological control clarifies natural purpose and meaning. "Nature's never quite / Sure she hasn't erred / In her vague design" until human beings, by controlling and domesticating space as aviation does, "Undertake to tell her / What in being stellar / She's supposed to mean." The play on "supposed" makes a Blakean or Stevensian point: nature can be expected to mean only what we assume her to mean.

Thus Frost suggests in "Kitty Hawk" that the constant outreach and grasp of the intellect are properly Promethean, and that they both vitalize and fulfill the created world. We ought to fear not a "fall" into contact with the material, but only a sagging into intellectual stagnation, which would also be nature's loss. The most appropriate or (punningly) "becoming fear"

Is lest habit-ridden
In the kitchen midden
Of our dump of earning
And our dump of learning
We come nowhere near
Getting thought expressed.

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The importance of getting thought expressed suggests the underlying link between the philosophical assumptions of Part Two and the personal reminiscences of Part One of "Kitty Hawk." The two sections and their widely separated times are held together, not chiefly by the shared location but by the metaphor of flight: the aeronautical type of the Wright brothers in Part Two, and the aborted poetical flight of the fledgling poet of 1894 ("a young Alastor") in Part One. (The poem's subtitle—"A skylark . . . in three-beat phrases"—underlines the Shelleyan implications of the flight metaphor.) Nor is the metaphor an adventitious link; it is meant to suggest that what is true of technology is also true of poetry. The same claims which Frost is overtly making for science he is implicitly making for art; both represent the triumph of mind or imagination over nature. Physically, he grants, earth can do no more than passively reflect the rays of sun and moon; intellectually, we make our own light.

All we do's reflect
 From our rocks, and yes,
 From our brains no less.
 And the better part
 Is the ray we dart
 From this head and heart,
 The *mens animi*.

Thus Frost gives his familiar play on "reflecting" a distinctly Promethean twist in this poem. Elsewhere, the mind often reflects in the sense of mirroring the natural. Here it reflects independently and creatively; that intellectual "ray we dart" from our minds, both in science and in poetry, is the central light which orders the universe and gives it meaning.

If some of the assertions of "Kitty Hawk" are surprising, so is its relationship to the rest of Frost's poems: such Prometheanism is not a unique aberration coming near the end of the poet's career, but only the most explicit and extended statement of an attitude which shapes a number of earlier poems. Some of these poems simply state the opposition between natural fact and human impulse to go beyond it. Thus, in "A Loose Mountain," Frost again portrays science as Promethean. When he sees a meteor shower, he wonders whether it may not be only a small foretaste of the ultimate destruction of the earth by "The heartless and enormous Outer Black." Both the meteor shower and the potential destruction of the earth are seen, in a kind of joke, as punishment aimed at human science for almost literally

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re-enacting the role of Prometheus—"No doubt directed at our heads as rebels / In having taken artificial light / Against the ancient sovereignty of night." In the well-known passage from "West-Running Brook" cited at the head of this essay, it is not science but the "backward motion toward the source"—which a number of critics have shown to be associated with the Bergsonian *élan vital*⁴—that is opposed to natural flux, "The stream of everything that runs away."

Such poems show Frost's recurrent interest in the opposition between natural fact and the Promethean impulse, but they do not dramatize that opposition or the power of that impulse. Other poems begin to act out the Promethean struggle, usually in Frost's characteristic movement from description of a natural fact or event to "reading" of its meaning, or, in the poet's own words, "from sight to insight."⁵

"Sand Dunes," a masterful little poem, if it does not act out an actual response of the human psyche to natural fact, is characteristic in dramatizing what might be called a promised response (just as "Into My Own" or "The Sound of Trees" or "An Empty Threat" dramatizes a promised departure). Like "A Loose Mountain" and many of these Promethean pieces, "Sand Dunes" is set at a moment when natural fact threatens to become not just massive but oppressive, even murderous. Here the ocean waves which threaten the land in "Once by the Pacific" are demonically resurrected (ll. 2-3) as sand dunes, intending to assault "the fisher town / And bury in solid sand / the men" whom the ocean "could not drown."

But here, against this primal assault of natural fact, Frost asserts a primal faith in the persistence of mind. Speaking still of the sea whose spirit lurks in these dunes, Frost insists with a wonderfully telling verb that "She may know cove and cape, / But she does not know mankind"—after all, only mankind can *know* anything in a more than physical sense—"If by any change of shape / She hopes to cut off mind." Mind is even more Protean than sea:

Men left her a ship to sink:
They can leave her a hut as well;
And be but more free to think
For the one more cast-off shell.

In this poem, as in all of the poems I am considering, the assault of natural fact does not oppress the human mind or spirit, but strikes a Promethean spark of self-assertiveness from it. This self-assertion is based on a Thoreauvian freedom which derives from the mind's capacity for constant renewal—for repeatedly leaving behind former structures (ship or hut) in order to save and renew itself. Moreover, that

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freedom and power, as "Kitty Hawk" would predict, help to transform the natural world at least a bit. Despite the massive threat of sea and dunes, nature recovers a touch of its Thoreauvian friendliness in that last quatrain: it is the hermit crab, like the beautiful bug hatched after sixty years in the applewood tree (*Walden* 333), which serves as model for the mind of how to survive by leaving the past behind, abandoning an outgrown shell and outdoing the sea itself in "changes of shape."

The opposition between man and earth is even starker in a less distinguished poem, "A Soldier," published in the same section of *West-Running Brook*. (The power of this sonnet is vitiated, to my reading, by an overly insistent tone in the final three lines—a tone which I suspect arises from the personal association of this poem with Edward Thomas, who had died a decade before it was first published.) In "A Soldier," natural obstruction appears to be insurmountable and spirit, at first glance, thoroughly defeated. The soldier—for Frost, as for Stevens at moments, a figure of capable imagination—is a "fallen lance that lies as hurled, / That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust." The twice-repeated "lies" suggests the finality of the soldier's death; the repeated verb of "come dew, come rust" suggests by contrast that only the natural cycle, corrosive of human effort, goes on. From the apparent futility of the soldier's death the poem's meditation appears to reason outward to the inevitable defeat of all projections of the spirit:

Our missiles always make too short an arc.
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
The curve of earth, and striking, break their own;
They make us cringe for metal-point on stone.

The trajectory of natural process, "The curve of earth," is not only not the same as our "own," the "arc" of human desiring; that natural trajectory is greater than, and destined to defeat, that "too short" arc of our aims. The spirit's desire, if not pointless, is predestined to come up short against natural fact, to be shattered on what Emerson calls "this cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world" (*Complete Works* 6:19).

But even in these first eleven lines the poem has proleptically rejected its own preliminary reading of the soldier's death: "If we" judge it to have been pointless, "It is because like men we look too near." In a larger and more Promethean context we would be able to see the indestructibility of spirit; after all, the fallen lance which is the soldier "still lies pointed as it plowed the dust"—"pointed" with human purpose, having "plowed" the dust in an effort to make it fruitful. The harvest of that sacrifice is the burden of the poem's final straining lines:

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this we know, the obstacle that checked
 And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
 Further than target ever showed or shone.

In some sense not readily apparent to us, the defeat of human effort is not final; as in "Sand Dunes," natural obstruction serves ultimately to strike a spark from the spirit, to "shoot the spirit on" toward some supernatural "target," even as the soldier's body was shot in a different sense. Thus the arc of the soldier's intention turns out not to have been "too short" after all—it was aimed at some invisible and immeasurable goal. And the poem's last word, "shone," recalls the assertion of "Kitty Hawk" that the real sun of our world is not a natural ball of gases but the irrepressible reflection of "*The mens animi*." When Frost says that "we know" all of this, he is not only distinguishing human beings from the sea, which "does not know mankind," but also suggesting that "to know" is, at least in these poems, chiefly a matter of assertion rather than of passive intellectual acceptance. In these poems, we "know" as much through the imagination or through sheer desire as through intellect.

The ultimate desire, as "A Soldier" intimates, is to live and not die, and that fundamental life-wish is central to the Promethean poems. Indeed, it is an important presence in a number of poems which are not ultimately Promethean, like "My butterfly" and "The Census-Taker." It forms the bright underside of, and adds an element of drama to, the latter poem. Here, too, there is a strong sense of isolation and, as in many of the Promethean poems, a sense that human enterprise is vulnerable to defeat by external forces. The poem's landscape attains an almost lunar barrenness, and the shell of a cabin to which the census-taker has come is both dilapidated and empty; human presence has almost entirely been erased from the scene. Yet the wind, with some help from the speaker's imagination, "swung a door / Forever off the latch, as if rude men / Passed in and slammed it shut each one behind him / For the next one to open for himself." As a result of this Aeolian activity, "I counted nine I had no right to count / (But this was dreamy-unofficial counting)." Although the census-taker finds "no people that dared show themselves, / None not in hiding from the outward eye," the inward eye insists on making its "dreamy unofficial" count of human presences. Its motive: "It must be I want life to go on living."

We see that wish in its purest form, perhaps, in the deeply Promethean "There Are Roughly Zones." The situation described in the opening lines of that poem—night and winter—is a familiar Frost scene: as in "Storm Fear" or "An Old Man's Winter Night," the

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domestic center is dramatically opposed to threatening external forces: "We sit indoors and talk of the cold outside"; the winter wind "Is a threat to the house. But the house has long been tried." The struggle between human desires and natural forces here involves a hostage, a peach tree which has been planted "very far north" and may not survive the cold, windy night. In pondering the meaning of the peach tree's plight, the poet asks a pair of questions:

What comes over a man, is it soul or mind—
 That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined?
 You would say his ambition was to extend the reach
 Clear to the Arctic of every living kind.
 Why is his nature forever so hard to teach
 That though there is no fixed line between wrong and right,
 There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed?

Though the peach tree, if it is destroyed, "can blame this limitless trait in the hearts of men," the poem, clearly, is not inclined to do so. It will blame, rather, a kind of natural "betrayal" (ll. 15-17). Like all the Promethean poems, this one in fact celebrates the obstinacy of "soul or mind" which refuses to accept the rough zones of natural law; it celebrates man's yearnings, "That to no limits and bounds he can stay confined." The positive, Promethean implications of that line are clarified by a parallel passage from "Kitty Hawk," where, using the same antithetical rhyme of "mind" with "confined," Frost notes how surprising it is that humans, of all creatures, can fly:

That's because though mere
 Lilliputians we're
 What Catullus called
 Somewhat (*aliquid*).
 Mind you, we are mind.
 We are not the kind
 To stay too confined.

Thus the most important lesson of "There Are Roughly Zones" is, paradoxically, the value of refusing to learn the obvious natural lesson of caution. Frost relishes the fact that man's "nature," unlike any other part of nature, is "forever so hard to teach" about natural restrictions, because he is confident that "this limitless trait" is no mere anarchic stubbornness; it is an assertion of life: "You would say that his ambition was to extend the reach / Clear to the Arctic of every living kind."

"There Are Roughly Zones" hints at a surprisingly Promethean use of natural fact which is typical of the poems I am considering: it may

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educate not only by analogy, as it normally does in Frost, but also by opposition. One poem which most strikingly acts out that process is "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road." This poem, even within the limits of the sonnet, comes close to dramatizing the imagination's struggle with, and the peripeteia in which it overcomes, natural fact. Many of the poems which I am considering hint at a two-part movement. "A Soldier," for instance, embodies a kind of double vision: the narrow vision of the soldier as simply defeated in the first eleven lines, counterpoised by the "knowledge" of the last three lines. "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" acts out this double vision in its very structure and movement: natural fact poses a crucial question in the first five lines, and the imagination emphatically answers it in the last nine.

The opening lines personify natural facts in order to suggest their purposiveness: "the tempest with a crash of wood / Throws down" the tree "in front of us"; or, as the poem's subtitle suggests, the tree has fallen "To hear us talk." Thus the fallen tree is seen not wholly as an accident, but as a kind of natural challenge: "not to bar / Our passage to our journey's end for good, / But just to ask us who we think we are / Insisting always on our own way so." Thus storm and tree deliberately raise the central question of self-consciousness: "who we think we are."

In the poem's second movement, in ll. 6-14, Frost again attributes purpose to the storm: "She likes to halt us in our runner tracks, / And make us get down in a foot of snow / Debating what to do without an ax." The human traveler, as often in critical moments of American nature writing,⁶ is brought up short and forced to deal directly and nakedly with the natural. Out of this direct confrontation, in the second, larger reading of the event's meaning, in the sestet, comes an answer to the crucial question raised earlier. The storm may throw a tree down in front of us;

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain:
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain,
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole

And, tired of aimless circling in one place,
Steer straight off after something into space.

This is a remarkably Promethean moment—asserted, as in every one of these poems, virtually without any heightening of Frost's usual conversational language, without rising above that "everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above" (*Letters* 83-84).⁷ The answer

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to "who we think we are" has already been implied in the next line of the question: "Insisting always on our own way so." ("Way" is a typically double-edged word: both "path" and "particular manner of behavior.") Here that answer is underlined. Human beings are defined by the unbounded yearning of mind, spirit, or imagination—again "this limitless trait in the hearts of men"—which, when it begins to feel its true strength, will not be denied by restrictive natural fact, even if it must Titanically "seize earth by the pole" and, like Shelley's skylark or like the Wright brothers, leave earth in its flight, "Steer straight off after something into space." Yet, for all its Prometheism, this poem suggests that natural opposition to human yearning is only apparent, and that a kind of cooperation underlies the apparent assault of physical forces. The storm here, unlike the sea in "Sand Dunes," finally "knows" something—namely, the intensity of human desire and determination. Natural obstruction "is in vain" only in the immediate sense that it cannot stop the active imagination. In a deeper sense it is not futile: natural barriers can serve, paradoxically, to help make the imagination more aware of its own powers. In a sense, the fallen tree does "bar / Our passage to our journey's end for good"—not permanently, but for our benefit. Obstruction may be instruction, may clarify and intensify the spirit and will. As Emerson puts it: "limitation . . . is the meter of the growing man. We stand against Fate, as children stand up against the wall in their father's house and notch their height from year to year" (*Complete Works* 6:30).

Frost tells a more extended story of spiritual growth by opposition to nature in another remarkable poem, "Wild Grapes." In many details of plot—too many, one may suspect, for coincidence—"Wild Grapes" is reminiscent of Wordsworth's fragment called "Nutting," but the poem's lesson is almost the opposite of Wordsworth's.

While "Nutting" begins its recollection with a sense of blessedness, harking back to "One of those heavenly days that cannot die," the remembrance in "Wild Grapes" seems to inspire at first a sense of fear and trauma. The five-year-old heroine of the poem had begun as an active and fearless child, like Wordsworth's young nut-gatherer extravagant in nature: "a little boyish girl / My brother could not always leave at home." But her fearless childhood was apparently brought to an end by an infernal event: "that beginning was wiped out in fear / The day I swung suspended with the grapes, / And was come after like Eurydice."

In the description of that apparently traumatic event, the natural setting is strikingly similar to that of "Nutting." Wordsworth's young

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nut-gatherer must "force" his way through "tangled thickets" to "A virgin scene!"—"to one dear nook / Unvisited, where not a broken bough / Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign / Of devastation," but the untouched hazel trees are "with tempting clusters hung." So in Frost's poem the scene is characterized by isolation, peacefulness, and feminine attractiveness: the narrator's brother leads her to "a glade" in which a white birch stands "alone, / Wearing a thin headdress of pointed leaves, / And heavy on her heavy hair behind, / Against her neck, an ornament of grapes."

Soon, however, just as in "Nutting," the tranquillity of the virgin scene is disrupted by the human harvester. The girl's brother bends the birch down to the ground to enable her to pluck the wild grapes; but suddenly the appropriation of nature by human is dramatically reversed.

I said I had the tree. It wasn't true.
The opposite was true. The tree had me.
The minute it was left with me alone,
It caught me up as if I were the fish
And it the fishpole.

Suddenly the birch snaps back upright, and the terrified little girl finds herself high off the ground, hanging on for dear life. In a preliminary reaction much like the speaker's in "Nutting," this ravishment of human by tree is implicitly seen—at the time—as punishment for violation of the natural order. The brother half-jokingly shouts to the dangling girl not to be afraid of the grapes—"they won't pick you if you don't them." He also tells her that she now knows "how it feels . . . / To be a bunch of fox grapes . . . / that when it thinks it has escaped the fox . . . / Just then come you and I to gather it. . . ." Implicitly, the tree has turned the tables on the human interloper to reprove her assault on the grapes.

If the young Wordsworth's ravishment of nature is a chastening experience, how much more chastening ought this drama to prove—to have been "run off with by birch trees into space," transported like Eurydice to fearful regions of experience. The triumph of "Wild Grapes" is that the experience is finally not chastening at all. In "Nutting," the human assault does not have to be actively reprovved: "The silent trees" and "intruding sky" are sufficient to teach the young speaker a lesson in imaginative humility, in restraint of exuberant possessiveness, in "gentleness of heart." In Frost's poem, however, the imagination is in a more Promethean mood. Though the natural emblem would seem clearly to suggest a lesson in humility—though the

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girl's assault on the grapes has been patently rebuked—the mature woman's meditation on the experience refuses to deduce any such lesson.

In fact, though the plot of "Wild Grapes" is remarkably close to that of "Nutting," both the lesson and the structure of this poem are reminiscent of the climactic Simplon Pass episode of the sixth book of *The Prelude*. There, during the Alpine crossing in 1790, Wordsworth is baffled by the natural event, which seems to frustrate his expectations: "I was lost; / Halted without an effort to break through." It is only in retrospect, in a passage added fourteen years after the event, that the poet is able to realize: "But to my conscious soul I now can say— / 'I recognize the glory'" (11.596–99). So, in "Wild Grapes," an unusual lapse of time between the natural event, which befalls the five-year-old girl, and the final reading of its significance, retrospectively by the now-grown woman, yields a particularly assertive realization.

Even as early as the opening question of the poem, in the first six lines, it has been suggested that surprising harvests can be found if one knows where to look for them—and the final harvest here is the adult's lesson of the power of desire and imagination. The wild grapes grow high in birches, which always in Frost suggest aspiration, "Mostly as much beyond my lifted hands . . . / As the moon used to seem when I was younger." The "lifted hands" of desire, reaching for the moon which is both an extraterrestrial goal and (for Wordsworth as for Coleridge) a sign of imagination, stretch beyond natural limits and in doing so discover, at least retrospectively, the spirit's true strength. This is what the final meditative section of "Wild Grapes" concludes. The true lesson of her childhood experience, the mature woman suggests, is that she was ignorant: "It wasn't my not weighing anything / So much as my not knowing anything." But her ignorance is an imaginatively healthy kind of innocence, an ignorance of natural limitation: "I had not taken the first step in knowledge; / I had not learned to let go with the hands." In mature reflection, such ignorance or innocence is seen to be a valuable spiritual trait; the lesson which this woman finally draws is the opposite of that in "Nutting":

I had not learned to let go with the hands,
As still I have not learned to with the heart,
And have no wish to with the heart—nor need,
That I can see. The mind—is not the heart.
I may yet live, as I know others live,
To wish in vain to let go with the mind—

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Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

Here again the ultimate lesson, paradoxically, is the importance of *not* learning the obvious natural lesson—of discovering, beyond it, the spirit's own lesson, the power of "this limitless trait in the hearts of men" and girls and women. The little girl's fearful experience may have "wiped out" her intrepid youthful "beginning," but the death of that earlier self was the birth of a second and more triumphant self, "And the life I live now's an extra life." The girl-woman has been "translated" (1.45) to a higher realm of experience, "the upper regions" ruled by the heart's desires.

The final lines of "Wild Grapes" oppose "mind," here the instrument of prudential wisdom, to "heart," here the Promethean force which casts off merely prudential "cares" and limits: it is precisely in "not knowing anything" in the prudential sense about the conventionally accepted limits of desire, in being ignorant in the worldly sense, that the girl discovers the power of the heart and its desires. But such an opposition is atypical of the Promethean poems. Taken as a group, these poems celebrate a rich, powerful, and many-sided force, which Frost variously calls "mind," "heart," "soul," and "spirit," and which clearly includes both imagination and sheer desire as well. Indeed, Frost likes Catullus's phrase *mens animi* because it suggests both heart and intellect—"the thoughts of the heart," in Frost's own rendering (Thompson and Winnick 238). The census-taker's intent is not to add up bodies but "to count souls." Frost asks of the force which "comes over a man" and makes him plant peach trees beyond their natural range, "is it soul or mind?"

This power which informs the Promethean poems, whether we call it the *mens animi* or the *élan vital* or "this limitless trait in the hearts of men," involves above all the primal desire of the self—not letting go with the heart—and a radical kind of self-assertion—"Insisting always on our own way so." But, as in Emerson, in these poems the self is ultimately not selfish. One of its most insistent desires is for freedom, movement, and newness, signified not only by the flight metaphors of "Kitty Hawk" or the determination to "Steer straight off after something into space," but also by the molting metaphor of "Sand Dunes" (we can cast off our shells and "be but more free to think"). "Mind you, we are mind. / We are not the kind / To stay too confined"; the human being is by definition that creature who "can stay confined" "to no limits and bounds."

But the radical freedom from any kind of fixity or limits which

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these poems celebrate is not an end in itself. It is a means, among other things, to dominate and conquer external nature, which is defined, like the sea, as incapable of "knowing" anything, especially mankind, and, like "the Outer Black," as being "heartless." Through mind, both scientific and poetic, and through heart or desire, the Promethean Frost wants to "seize earth by the pole," to make "the infinite" "Rationally ours." The images of illumination in these poems—of "the ray we dart / From this head and heart," of the "artificial light" which we have "taken" "Against the ancient sovereignty of night"—are images of actively seeking out the unknown, probing into it (as in "All Revelation"), knowing it, naming it ("to master Nature / By some nomenclature"), domesticating it, humanizing it. But for Frost, as for Emerson, to conquer nature in this imaginative assault is not to do it ultimate violence, but to give it meaning and so complete it: "Ours was to reclaim" the "waste" of air and space; we appropriately "Undertake to tell" nature what "She's supposed to mean."

The ultimate goals of the imaginative uprisings in these poems, then, are truly Promethean: to humanize nature and, finally, to assert our deepest wish, that life should prove more powerful than death. "A Soldier" asserts almost baldly that war and earth can "check and trip the body," but cannot impede the flight of "the spirit"; the planter risks the peach tree's life, ironically, because "his ambition" is "to extend the reach / Clear to the Arctic of every living kind." For the author of these poems as for the census-taker, "It must be I want life to go on living."

We have for so long thought of Frost as a poet of the "diminished thing" and the "momentary stay against confusion," as an ironist, as a conservative both temperamentally and poetically, as a poet who "almost always . . . chooses to counterbalance" "transcendent impulses" (Wyatt 89–91), that it is little short of startling to realize how thoroughly Promethean he can be in certain moods—but then, the Romantic predecessor whom he most often echoes verbally is not Wordsworth or Keats but Shelley, a formidably Promethean writer himself. In poems like "There Are Roughly Zones," "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," and "Wild Grapes," the imagination rises up "To bathe in the Waters of Life; to wash off the Not Human," as Blake puts it (141). Yet it remains true, of course, that the poems I am discussing represent an extreme stage in Frost's visionary effort. With such poems we reach the limits, remarkable as they are, of Frost's Prometheanism.

In the final analysis that Prometheanism is less Blakean—central, continuous, and polemical—than Wordsworthian. Like Wordsworth's

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moments of imaginative self-assertion in the Simplon Pass episode, in his description of “spots of time” (*Prelude* 12:208–23), and in the closing lines of *The Prelude* (14:448–54), Frost’s Promethean moments are peninsular, outgrowths of a larger body of verse which is more moderate in its claims for the power of imagination vis-à-vis natural fact. We need to recognize more clearly than we have the genuinely Promethean or (in Emerson’s sense) Orphic side of Frost’s poetry. But that side is, on the whole, outweighed by a more characteristic sense of at least relative humility in the relationship with the created world.⁸ That sense is best dramatized, perhaps, in “Birches.”

The first twenty lines of “Birches” clearly hint at Promethean tendencies. The poem is set at that time of the year which most suggests imaginative stirrings: the springtime moment in the imagination’s life when it begins to rouse itself from winter lethargy. Though immobilized by their wintry covering of ice, as the Aeolian “breeze rises” the birches move “and turn many-colored / As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.” “Soon,” warmed by the sun, they “shed crystal shells,” like the human beings of “Sand Dunes” casting off dead external coverings to take on new shapes and new vitality. The evidences of that spiritual molting, as many have noted, echo the Promethean outreach of *Adonais*: “Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away / You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.”⁹ And, though the birches are permanently “bowed” by the ice storm, they remain suggestive of aspiration: “You may see their trunks arching in the woods / Years afterward,” still straining toward that inner dome of heaven.

In the poem’s central fiction, Frost adroitly converts the birches from emblems of Promethean aspiration to emblems of natural fact conquered by that aspiration. Rather than an ice storm, the poet “should prefer to have some boy bend” the birches; this fictive explanation represents more clearly the central presence of *human* activity, and human domination of the natural (“One by one he subdued his father’s trees”). The comparison used to describe the care which the boy takes in climbing to the very “top branches” of the birches—“climbing carefully / With the same pains you use to fill a cup / Up to the brim, and even above the brim”—reminds us that this is not only a poem about trees but a celebration of spiritual thirst.

But in the last third of the poem, where he explicitly reads in the act of swinging birches a lesson for the governance of one’s imaginative life, Frost draws back from the Prometheanism implied earlier in the poem: “I’d like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to

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it and begin over." As that latter line suggests, the visionary assertion of "Birches" is ultimately less extreme than that of "Wild Grapes." As Richard Wilbur suggests, the echoes of Shelley in this poem are ultimately used to argue against Shelley's Prometheanism: "'Birches,' taken as a whole, is in fact an answer to Shelley's kind of boundless neo-Platonic aspiration" (113). The famous closing lines of the poem clearly move toward a reconciliation of human aspiration and earthly reality. The poet hopes that "no fate" will "willfully misunderstand" him "And half grant what I wish and snatch me away / Not to return. Earth's the right place for love."

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.

The proper role of the mind or spirit is seen here, not as a conquest of the natural, not as a transcending of earth or a "steering straight off after something into space," but as part of a process of give and take, "launching out" and return. The girl/woman in "Wild Grapes," because of her "not knowing anything" about "letting go," about accommodating natural fact, is carried off by the birch in that poem like a fish caught by a fishpole. The less Promethean speaker of "Birches," on the other hand, knows how to use natural fact to reach its uppermost limits, to climb "*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more," but then to accept the end of the trip and be returned by the tree in a kind of cooperative effort. The imagination here again asserts its freedom and autonomy by dominating natural fact; but then, refreshed by that flexing of imaginative muscle, it "comes back" to natural fact to "begin over," now willing to accept the different but also "almost incredible freedom," as Frost puts it elsewhere, of being "enslaved to the hard facts of experience" (*Letters* 179).¹⁰

Such a return or reconciliation would, for Blake or Shelley, amount to surrender. But Frost, like most other American nature writers, does not posit Blake's or Shelley's kind of inevitable struggle to the death between imaginative perception and natural fact. Like Thoreau (with certain exceptions), like Emerson in his more restrained moods, Frost believes that, in the final analysis, the two forces are capable of cooperating to achieve meaning. Even apparent natural obstruction of human desire, as in "A Soldier" or "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," or apparent natural reproof of human overreaching, as in "Wild Grapes," is part of a larger design: nature impedes the mind in order to

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clarify and intensify its awareness of its own creative powers. In other words, for Frost, as for Wordsworth,¹¹ even when the mind learns essentially transcendent lessons about its own strength, those lessons are taught, at least indirectly, by nature.

Frost's final assessment of the balance between imaginative outreach and the return to earthly reality is well summarized in "Bond and Free," the poem immediately preceding "Birches" in *Mountain Interval*. "Thought," with its exploratory flight on "dauntless wings" into the farthest reaches of "the interstellar gloom," is not seen here as unambiguously admirable in the manner of the Wright brothers; it is more nearly an Icarus-like overreacher, returning reluctantly to natural fact "With smell of burning on every plume." "Love," on the other hand, "has earth to which she clings / With hills and circling arms about." Though bound to the natural reality of "snow and sand and turf," however, Love is neither dispirited nor deprived of all revelation:

Some say Love by being thrall
And simply staying possesses all
In several beauty that Thought fares far
To find fused in another star.

In his most characteristic moods, Frost ultimately distrusts that momentary impulse of Thought or mind or heart to "steer straight off after something into space"—chiefly, I think, because of the dangers of some kind of solipsism in such flight. (It is no accident that Love, in this poem as in the famous line from "Birches" or in "The Silken Tent," ties the spirit to earth and natural fact.)

The return to natural fact is ultimately characteristic of Frost—but it is a return, and is satisfying to poet and reader alike only because it follows the Promethean flight on "dauntless wings." Richard Poirier is essentially right in speaking of "Frost's congenital distrust of the freedom he liked to extol, his ultimate distrust of an imagination set free as it is in Stevens" (79). But that distrust of unfettered imagination would be neither poetically interesting nor spiritually necessary if Frost did not feel, at least from "Reluctance" to "Kitty Hawk," the attraction of Promethean possibilities.

NOTES

¹ Thompson and Winnick report that Frost began the poem "in 1953 after a visit with his friends the Huntingtons Cairneses at Kittyhawk" (300).

² Thus man's contemporary, if not his ideal, "relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding; as by manure; the economic use of fire, wind, water, and the mariner's needle; steam, coal, chemical agriculture; the

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repairs of the human body by the dentist and surgeon" (Emerson, *Collected Works* 1:43).

³ Fifty years earlier, in "The Trial by Existence," Frost himself (like Blake) had apparently equated creation and birth with a kind of fall, into what he calls "The obscuration upon earth." Here, however, he reverses that attitude.

⁴ See, for instance, Thompson (*Early Years* 579–81, n. 16; *Years of Triumph* 300–03) and Poirier (266–67).

⁵ The phrase is the subtitle of "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind." On the characteristic structure and movement of such poems, see Bagby.

⁶ Compare, for example, the astonishing scene at the end of Part 1 of William Faulkner's *The Bear*, in which Isaac McCaslin relinquishes rifle, watch, and compass in order to get lost and thus find the bear.

⁷ Borroff cites "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" as a good example of Frost's characteristic "speaking voice," which she distinguishes from his rarer "chanting voice" (134–35).

⁸ For differing views on the balance of these two forces in post-Emersonian American poetry, see Bloom and Yoder (especially Chapter VIII).

⁹ Frost's "inner dome of heaven" may also echo "the infinite dome / Of heaven" in "Mont Blanc."

¹⁰ See Bacon's comments (especially on 326) on the relationship of "Birches" to "Kitty Hawk."

¹¹ See Hartman, especially 31–69.

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Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics

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Over the last forty years literature scholars have been turning to art history, investigating the aesthetic doctrines of formalism developed within the Bloomsbury group in order to understand their effect on the writing of Virginia Woolf (Roberts; Johnstone 82–91; McLaurin; Quick; Dowling). At this point it seems only fair that the tables be turned and an art historian look to Woolf's writings for insight into formalism. That such a critical inquiry should only now suggest itself indicates not its lack of importance, but, on the contrary, the strength of formalism's hold over the unquestioned assumptions of art-historical practice. Bloomsbury's formalist aesthetic theory, like Keynesian economics, extended its influence far beyond the immediate circle in which it developed. Throughout the English-speaking world, the writings of Roger Fry and Clive Bell opened the way for the creation and reception of modern art in the first decades of this century.

The rejection of mimesis in favor of concentration on the play of abstract form: these were the fundamental tenets of Bloomsbury's aesthetic theories. As the center of the art world shifted from Europe to the United States after World War II, these principles were absorbed by American critics—foremost among them Clement Greenberg—and became the basis for modernist creative and critical practice. Only recently, in the culture of “post-modernism,” has there been any broad

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movement in art scholarship to question formalism's philosophical premises or to see its rise to pre-eminence as anything but inevitable. As we assess the strengths and the weaknesses of a philosophy that in its maturity came to dominate our field so completely, we become curious about the historical conditions of its birth, and specifically about the reactions of those who may be said to have attended its delivery and participated in its early development.

Because Virginia Woolf was one of the keenest and most articulate members of the Bloomsbury group, her reactions to emergent formalism are naturally important. Woolf's take on formalism is of special interest, however, because her consistently insightful feminism anticipates a crucial component in the current post-modernist rejection of formalism. Feminist artists and critics have challenged Greenbergian formalism's claim to transcend all extra-aesthetic concerns. They have revealed, behind its professed objectivity, an ideology strongly marked by patriarchal values: a penchant for hierarchization and the assumption of unchallengeable authority among critics, a model of isolated and antisocial creativity for artists, and a bias toward art that emphasizes size and brawn—huge raw metal sculptures, for example, or house paint flung around great swatches of canvas.¹ That this later generation of formalists should generally characterize Woolf as a second-rate Joyce and dismiss the community of Bloomsbury painters altogether, reveals the depth of the rupture between formalism's initial conception in Bloomsbury and its later deployment.²

Woolf's initial reaction of skepticism and continuing ambivalence toward formalism, however, suggests that problematic assumptions about critical authority, creativity, and art's social role beset formalism from its inception. Still, the undisputed importance of formalist theory for Woolf, and her lasting devotion to its progenitor, Roger Fry, stand as testimony that as an aesthetic system formalism is not without its appeal. In short, Virginia Woolf found herself sixty years ago in a position of ambivalence similar to that of many of us today. The account of her relationship to formalism contributes both to the history of twentieth-century thought and to contemporary debates over aesthetics.

My introduction suggests that a chronological approach to the study of Woolf and formalism is not simply the reflex of art scholarship, which—despite its similarities to literary criticism—constitutes itself as a branch of history, and so tends to emphasize chronology. As a historian I believe that our current understanding of the relationship between Woolf and formalism has suffered from a tendency to read the relevant texts without regard to their dates of issue, imposing a false stasis on

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what reveals itself as, actually, a remarkably dynamic relationship. It is significant, for example, that Woolf did not find formalism immediately and self-evidently useful. One reason, certainly, is that in its first phase, between 1909 and 1917, formalism explicitly opposed itself to literature. Even the term "literary" applied to art signified an unhealthy emphasis on illusion at the expense of such formal values identified by Fry as rhythm of line, mass, proportion, light and shade, color, and perspective (Fry, *Vision* 33–34). In 1914, Clive Bell's *Art*, a summary of formalist principles developed primarily by Fry in journalistic essays published over the previous few years, concluded that because art is sullied by any reference outside itself: "Literature is never pure art. . . . Most of it is concerned, to some extent, with facts and ideas" (153). At about the same time, Roger Fry was writing, "I think literature is usually very little to do with art" (*Letters* 369), and Woolf later recalled the prescriptions for literature he made at this time:

He laid sacrilegious hands upon the classics. He found glaring examples in Shakespeare, in Shelley, of the writer's vice of . . . importing impure associations. . . . Literature was suffering from a plethora of old clothes. Cézanne and Picasso had shown the way; writers should fling representation to the winds and follow suit. (RF 172)³

For her part, Woolf at this period remarked of her Bloomsbury colleagues and their penchant for purely formal values: "Artists are an abominable race. The furious excitement of these people all the winter over their pieces of canvas coloured green and blue, is odious" (*Letters* 2:15). Her early fiction—both *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919)—is characterized by the conspicuous rejection of formalism. In the first, it comes when Terence reads Milton aloud, "because he said the words of Milton had substance and shape, so that it was not necessary to understand what he was saying" (326). This insistence that pure aesthetic experience is contaminated by any signification marks Terence as a convert to the early formalism codified in *Art*. Woolf recounts, however, that, "The words, in spite of what Terence had said, seemed to be laden with meaning, and perhaps it was for this reason that it was painful to listen to them" (326). Even David Dowling, a critic who is so determined to ground Woolf's fiction in Fry's aesthetic theory that he cites the descriptive passages in *The Voyage Out* as examples of "painterly vision" (whatever that may mean—certainly not the purely abstract art the Bloomsbury artists were producing at the time), ultimately has to acknowledge that during the period of its composition

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"Woolf felt that the painter was engaged essentially in a different task from the novelist" (104).⁴

Formalist aesthetics are more explicitly at issue in *Night and Day*, which Woolf began in 1916. Here art seen in the formalist manner as "a glow of faintly pleasing pink and brown tints" stultifies the heroine, putting her in "a pleasant dreamy state" (16), and it is only when Katharine uses the portrait of her grandfather to imagine him as "a man, young, unhappy, tempestuous, full of desires and faults," that she escapes the weight of convention and is able to make her ancestor an ally in change. Now, "doubts, questionings, and despondencies she felt, as she looked up, would be more welcome to him than homage." Even Ralph Denham's expressive doodle, a "little dot with flames around it," functions mimetically as "it represented . . . all that encircling glow which for him surrounded, inexplicably, so many of the objects of life" (493). Most revealing is Woolf's slyly dismissive use of formalism's vocabulary of "aesthetic emotion" when Mary Datchet goes to see the marbles in the British Museum: "One must suppose, at least, that her emotions were not purely esthetic, because, after she had gazed at the Ulysses for a minute or two, she began to think about Ralph Denham" (82). Mary goes on, in a most unformalist way, to invent fantastical stories in response to the images before her.

Yet only a few years after this evocation of art as little more than an effective impetus to storytelling—an attitude she humorously notes would mean the loss "of my aesthetic soul" in the eyes of her formalist friends (*Diary* 1:168)⁵—Woolf found herself prepared to assert the dependence of modern literature on painting. In 1925, she wrote:

We are under the dominion of painting. Were all modern paintings to be destroyed, a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cézanne, Derain, and Picasso; he would be able to say with those books before him that painters of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas, squeezing tube after tube, in the room next door.
(*Moment* 140)

What had transpired since Woolf's first exposure to formalist theory was a change, not only in Woolf, but also in formalism.

The constantly evolving quality of Bloomsbury formalism is largely ignored in histories of aesthetics that measure the accomplishments of Fry and Bell in terms of their usefulness to the next generation of Americans. This is not the place for a thorough exegesis of the development of Bloomsbury formalism after the initial single-minded

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emphasis on abstract form epitomized by Clive Bell's *Art*. If the basic aim of Bloomsbury's later aesthetic theorizing can be encapsulated, however, it is the attempt to reintegrate representation into the formalist paradigm, without sacrificing an ideal of purely aesthetic experience. The shift from first- to second-generation formalism in Bloomsbury may be marked from around the end of World War I. By 1917 Clive Bell and others were complaining of Fry's waning interest in avant-garde art (Spalding 211), and it was around this time that Fry became interested in the aesthetics of poetry and began what would become a lifelong project translating Mallarmé.

Having opened itself to issues of language and representation, formalism in its second incarnation began to attract Woolf's interest.⁶ As early as 1916, she crowed:

I predict the complete rout of post impressionism, chiefly because Roger, who has been staying with us, is now turning to literature, and says pictures only do 'to look at about 4 times.' (*Letters* 2:77-78)

In diary entries of November 1917 she moves rapidly from "I don't like talking of art in front of him" to "taking a splendid flight above personalities, we discussed literature & aesthetics" (*Diary* 1:75, 80).⁷ Woolf quotes Fry's contribution to the discussion:

All art is representative. You say the word tree, & you see a tree. Very well. Now every word has an aura. Poetry combines the different aura's [sic] in a sequence.

This may be taken as the first record of a theory Fry repeated in a draft of the introduction to his Mallarmé translation, where he rejected poetry without signification as having negligible aesthetic effect (Mallarmé 295). Fry finally published his thesis in *Transformations*:

There is [in poetry] the pleasure of rhythmic utterance, but this is already concerned with relations, and even this is, I believe, accessory to the emotion aroused by rhythmic changes of states of mind due to the meanings of the words. (5)

Fry's partner in developing the second phase of formalist theory was not Clive Bell, who had joined him in the first, but the young French intellectual Charles Mauron. Like Fry, Mauron was trained as a scientist, a career he was forced to leave due to failing sight. After their meeting in 1919, Fry encouraged Mauron to turn his attention to literature, which he did, eventually inventing the critical technique of "psychocritique" (Hutcheon). By 1925, Fry was publishing Mauron's articles on aesthetics in the *Burlington Magazine*, and together they addressed the Décades de Pointigny conference, with Fry reporting of

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Mauron's paper, "It clears up endless points and completes my aesthetic" (*Letters* 580). In 1927, the Woolfs' Hogarth Press published Mauron's *Burlington* essays and the address from the *Décades*, translated by Fry and combined under the title *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature*. Its stated purpose is to resolve "the old scholastic distinction of form and content" (71). To this end, Mauron proposes the solidification of Fry's "auras" into what he calls "psychological volumes" as the "analog" to the physical volumes manipulated by the visual artist: "As the painter creates a spatial being, the writer creates a psychological being" (66–67). Woolf may have put it more eloquently when, in 1925, she described how Proust illuminated "the hard tangible material shapes of bodiless thoughts" (*Moment* 141). The year before, she had written to an old friend, the painter Jacques Raverat, suggesting that the writer's art is "to catch and consolidate . . . those splashes of yours" (*Letters* 3:135), and as early as 1918 she was asserting her "plastic sense of words" (*Diary* 1:168). However the phrasing varies, it is clear that Woolf was very much in the thick of Bloomsbury's aesthetic theorizing in the years after World War I.

It is not my purpose here to repeat the detailed exegeses of formalism's influence on Woolf's postwar fiction. Nor am I proposing complete "readings" of the novels under discussion. Rather, I am looking at how Woolf's writing illuminates both the attractions and dangers of formalist practice. Because of feminism's active hand in the undermining of formalist authority, there has been a tendency for critics to assume that the two philosophies are inherently at odds.⁸ Given the feminist consciousness clearly in evidence from her earliest writings, however, it would be surprising if Woolf's subsequent attraction to formalism were unaffected by her feminism, and, in fact, Woolf as early as 1919 can be found deploying formalist principles in support of feminist arguments. In "Modern Novels" (originally a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*), Woolf adopts the language of formalism as part of a feminist strategy to gain authority over "Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy." Using the formalist valorization of aesthetic purity, Woolf is able to transcend conventional critical hierarchies that would privilege the treatment of subjects deemed significant by the dominant (patriarchal) culture. As a formalist she can turn the tables on what had seemed the high moral stance of her triumvirate of male authors, dismissing what she calls the materialism of their writing as "immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (*CE* 2:105).⁹ In a later version of this argument Woolf ties her critiques

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of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy to her condemnation of those who would betray what she calls "the *form* of the novel" by using it "to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire" (CE 1:324; my emphasis).¹⁰ And Woolf came to ground her reversal of standard literary values explicitly in a feminist sensibility:

When a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to man, and trivial what is to him important. (CE 2:146)

This explicitly feminist argument reveals the ideology inherent in Woolf's admonition in "Modern Fiction" that novelists reject the dictates of convention, which she personifies as "some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant" who insists on "plot" (CE 2:106). Instead, Woolf argues, novelists should look for formal significance in the traditionally feminine realm of the everyday, what she calls "the life of Monday or Tuesday," a phrase that, not coincidentally, reappears as the title of her first book of short stories:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern. . . . Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (CE 2:106–07)

The claims of pattern here support a vehement rejection of the literary tradition of Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy: "the sooner English fiction turns it back upon them . . . the better for its soul" (CE 2:104).¹¹

Even more provocative in Woolf's appreciation of formalism's potential feminist application is her emphasis on its disruption of assumptions about the nature of aesthetic experience. From the very earliest references to art—Zeuxis's grapes so real the birds pecked at them, Pygmalion's vivification of Galatea, Apelles's acquisition of Campaspe through his art—representation in western culture has been profoundly implicated in networks of desire and possession, so that by 1908, when Freud succinctly assessed the cultural role of art as fantasy fulfillment, he enumerated two categories of its appeal. Art, Freud says, affords its producers and consumers with vicarious access to what they cannot in real life attain, "wishes" for authority and sexual gratification. It is exactly this paradigm that Woolf attacks when she castigates the pictures exhibited at the Royal Academy, which were designed "to radiate the strange power to make the beholder more heroic and more romantic" (CE 4:210). But this phrase is, itself, a rewriting of a sentence from Clive Bell's *Art*, where he remarks that representational art merely

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"afford[s] new points of departure for new trains of romantic feeling or heroic thought" (32).

Feminist scholarship has done a great deal to specify the pernicious effect of romance and heroism on the depiction of women in patriarchal culture and the constitution of viewership as a form of authority.¹² Formalists, in their insistence that art be valued purely for its intrinsic aesthetic qualities, early on opposed conventions that used art as this kind of access to its subject matter. Mauron admonished:

The mistake is to suppose that there is a subject and a work which represents it. There is no subject, there are only objects which may have served as models . . . and there is besides, independent, real and different, this work itself. (58)

Nor did the first formalists shirk the gendered implications of their arguments. Fry went before a conference of psychoanalysts to reiterate the principle—asserted since his "Essay in Aesthetics" of 1909 (*Vision* 16–38)—that true art functions only in relation to a "detached" or "disinterested" vision that takes no part in desire. Examples of non-art, Fry told the psychoanalysts, are the pictures of "a beautiful woman" that appeal to "qualities which have nothing, or almost nothing, to do with their formal design or their aesthetic quality in the strict sense" (*Artist* 200–01). Here he is repeating a point Clive Bell made in *Art*, where the difference between desire and aesthetic emotion is emphasized because, Bell says, the two are widely confused:

With the man-in-the-street "beautiful" is more often than not synonymous with "desirable"; the word does not necessarily connote any aesthetic reaction whatever, and I am tempted to believe that in the minds of many the sexual flavor of the word is stronger than the aesthetic. I have noticed a consistency in those to whom the most beautiful thing in the world is a beautiful woman, and the next most beautiful thing a picture of one.¹³ (15)

In the formalists' insistence on "disinterested" looking is a rudimentary attempt to problematize seeing as vicarious possession, art that would serve desire. For Bloomsbury's formalist art critics the injunction to disinterested contemplation translated, in practice, to an injunction against simple mimesis, a judgment shared by Woolf in the mid-1920s, her period of strongest commitment to formalism. In a 1925 essay, Woolf insisted that painters not contaminate their art with "story-telling," but "say what they have to say by shading greens into blues, posing block upon block." Sure pure art, Woolf says, inspires her writing:

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Cézanne, for example—no painter is more provocative to the literary sense, because his pictures are so audaciously and provocatively content to be paint that the very pigment, [writers] say, seems to challenge us, to press on some nerve, to stimulate, to excite. (*Moment* 142)

How to apply the injunction against mimesis to prose and escape the mode of art as vicarious access to experience otherwise denied became a driving force behind the innovations in Woolf's novels of this time.

Begun the day after "hearing Roger discourse" on an exhibition of African carvings—"I dimly see that something in their style might be written" (*Letters* 2:429)—*Jacob's Room* (1922) starts with the author describing Jacob's mother while an artist paints her. From the opening words, which Mrs. Flanders writes and then smudges like the "hasty violet-black dab" with which she herself is rendered, Woolf's technique is to mediate the narrative through layers of representation that deny traditional authorial claims to an omniscient knowledge transferable to the reader. Here the painter's rejection of seeing-as-having is translated into the author's refusal to give authoritative knowledge. We are left at the end of *Jacob's Room* unable to *know* or *comprehend* its central figure—and it is significant that both terms carry a double sense of intellectual understanding and physical possession or inclusion, a dynamic underlined in the narrative, as Jacob evades all attempts to understand or embrace him.

Woolf's narrative technique—and its trope, the painter in the text—are pushed to what has been widely judged a more successful level in her *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Here Lily Briscoe's struggle to complete her painting of Mrs. Ramsay parallels, from beginning to end, the authorial project of a novel in which Woolf refuses to fulfill the narrator's traditional function:

The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; . . . we are not given the objective information which Virginia Woolf possesses regarding these objects of her creative imagination. (534)

The language of this description, quoted from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, is instructive in its demonstration of the critic's contest with an author who refuses him the conventional reader's (or viewer's) position of voyeuristic privilege.¹⁴ Auerbach's struggle with Woolf is fascinating in that he does not overtly oppose her stance; on the contrary, his essay on *To the Lighthouse* appears as the celebratory conclusion to his survey of western literature. Yet his frustration is clear in the phrasing, "We are not taken into Virginia Woolf's confidence and allowed to share her

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knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay's character" (534) or again in his remark that Woolf "does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters" (531). Just as Auerbach unselfconsciously wields a patriarchal standard to brand the domestic episodes of the novel "minor, unimpressive, random events" (546), his resistance to Woolf's text is startlingly demonstrated by his quotation and then virtual rewriting of several pages of her narrative so that it makes sense "systematically" (525-34). The gendered implications of Auerbach's struggle with Woolf's writing became explicit only in his last paragraphs, where he asserts that *To the Lighthouse* is filled "with good and genuine love but also, in its feminine way, with irony, amorphous sadness, and doubt of life" (552). Almost immediately after identifying the text as feminine, however, Auerbach insists that he can know it, indeed possess it as if it were his own life: "What takes place here . . . concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common" (552). Auerbach's bluster seeks to mask the critic's frustration Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own* in the face of texts that fracture convention by being ordered "as a woman would, if she wrote like a woman." That the order being subverted is one that confers on the reader an ersatz authority is evident in Woolf's tongue-in-cheek complaint—which might be a parody of Auerbach's critical style:

thus [the woman author] made it impossible or me to roll out my sonorous phrases about "elemental feelings," the "common stuff of humanity," "depths of the human heart," and all those other phrases which support us in our belief that, however clever we may be on top, we are very serious, very profound and very humane underneath. (Room 95)

Auerbach's desire to know *To the Lighthouse*—to comprehend its "feminine" mystery into the world of "men"—marks his distance from Bloomsbury's formalism. Mauron had instructed his readers to "listen long, be sincere, and not believe too surely that one will understand" (76). The ability to resist being known, in fact, Mauron made the definitive quality of a work of art: "As soon, then, as a phenomenon becomes sufficiently complex to be incomprehensible, it enters into the domain where a work of art becomes possible" (24). In contrast, Woolf tied the "rough and ready" move to comprehend explicitly to patriarchal privilege. She recalled how her brother Thoby "had consumed Shakespeare, somehow or other, by himself. He had possessed himself of it in his large clumsy way," which allowed him to dismiss as "sentimental" those aspects of the playwright's work that did

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not suit his purposes, and use the rest to buttress his own authority: "Shakespeare was to him his other world . . . where he took his bearings." Thoby, Woolf said, was able to use Shakespeare to reinforce his masculine confidence as one "equipped, unperturbed, knowing his place, relishing his inheritance and his part in life, aware of his competence, scenting the battle; already, in anticipation, a law maker; proud of being a man and playing his part among Shakespeare's men" (*Moments* 119).

Patricia Joplin has described how Auerbach's insistence on knowing *To the Lighthouse* reveals the unlearning of a lesson learned in Woolf's novel by the painter:

The anxious desire for an author who knows (*possesses*) her characters and who should *share* that knowledge of them with us, her readers, is akin to Lily Briscoe's arousal and frustration by her subject and model. . . . So long as Lily shares Auerbach's desire for a certain kind of knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay, she cannot complete her painting. ("Art" 92)

It is a disinterested, purely aesthetic, gaze that in *To the Lighthouse* Lily must learn for herself, once having observed it in Mr. Bankes' gaze of love

that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human grain. (73-74)

Here Woolf's prose echoes Bell's description of "aesthetic emotion," which is like the experience of "the pure mathematician rapt in his studies" (*Art* 25). When Lily finishes her painting—and Woolf ends her text—with the realization "I have had my vision," it is an acknowledgment that what neither they nor the reader have *had* is Mrs. Ramsay.

To the Lighthouse is Woolf's most eloquent investigation of the connections between formalism and feminism. The painting Lily Briscoe struggles over is expressly opposed to the predictable "pink women on the beach" painted by the contented men amid a swarm of admiring little boys (23), and connected to her refusal to marry or play a traditionally feminine role. Making its focus the stable pyramid of a woman and child framed in the window of a house, her picture fulfills Woolf's belief in a woman's art that renders important what had been considered insignificant. But Lily does not simply replace one subject with another. She simplifies, abstracts, and adjusts her image until it attains the independence from its model that makes it neither a substitute for the unattainable Mrs. Ramsay nor a symbol of "universal

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reverence," but significant in itself as an arrangement of form (81–83). After the publication of *To the Lighthouse* Woolf wrote to Fry, refusing as "hateful" any attempt to read universal symbolism in her text, and saying she wished she had dedicated the book to him, for "you have kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone" (*Letters* 3:385).¹⁵

Woolf's path to the formalism of *To the Lighthouse* was not, however, free of pitfalls; nor did she always afterward see art in formalist terms. Early on, she stumbled into one of the fundamental dilemmas of formalism: its unresolved contradiction between two models of artistic creation, "finding" and "making" (Shiff). Even within the same text, Bloomsbury formalism may often be found wavering between claiming, on one hand, that artists *find* "significant form"—be it visual or psychological volume—in the real world and instinctively record it, and, on the other hand, that significant form is *made* by artists, becoming a testament to talent and an embodiment of individual personality. As a philosophy of art, formalism's primary concern was always the development of a theory of aesthetic response rather than artistic creation, and Fry was content to dismiss the problem with the rather vague conclusion that "In most artists we find these two impulses present in various degrees, and sometimes they vary in relative intensity at different periods" (*Reflections* 127). Woolf falls solidly into the dilemma when, in the opening lines of the 1924 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" she states: "My belief [is] that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character which has thus imposed itself upon them" (*CE* 1:139). A conscious creation or an ineluctable imposition by some pre-existing entity? Woolf, like her formalist brethren, here asserts her right to decide not to decide.

The stories published together as *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), however, suggest that Woolf's entry into formalism was marked by considerable anxiety concerning standards of reality and authorial control. The "varieties of narrative voice" in *Monday or Tuesday* have been noticed before (Hafley 33). "The String Quartet" follows a model of author as finder, presenting snatches of conversation, thought, visual images, as if simply transcribed (*CSF* 188–92).¹⁶ This model is pushed to an extreme in "Blue & Green"—the colors in the title are those Woolf associated with painting (*Lighthouse* 309; *Moment* 142; *Letters* 2:15)—in which two short scenes and their associations are described (*CSF* 193). "The Mark on the Wall," at the other extreme, takes as its nominal subject something so tiny that the story becomes explicitly the chronicle of the writer's conscious thought. Despite the "solution" of the last line,

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giving the mark its identity, the focus is far more on the narrator—she is not “a very vigilant housekeeper,” not at all interested in “historical fiction,” “can think sitting still as well as standing up,” etc.—than on the snail (CSF 109–18). It is, however, especially in “An Unwritten Novel,” where the novel’s status as “unwritten” is significant of an authorial crisis, that the dilemma is explicit. Its narrator creates a story out of an incident witnessed in the world (an incident remarkably like the one still bothering Woolf in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”), only to find that the world undermines the “truth” of her tale. Woolf’s authorial voice here becomes explicitly a painter’s, as she debates whether to throw in a bunch of rhododendrons for their “fling of red and white,” or admonishes her central character:

Indeed now you can’t sit praying any longer. Kruger’s sunk beneath the clouds—washed over as with a painter’s brush of liquid grey, to which he adds a tinge of black. . . . (CSF 157, 159)

The final paragraphs lurch desperately from pride of comprehension—“I’ve read you right—I’m with you now”—to despair—“What do I stand on? What do I know?”—and finally to a determination to celebrate the contradiction: “it’s you unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace” (CSF 163–64). This resolution to embrace what nevertheless remains unknown, depicting without possessing, anticipates Lily’s attitude in *To the Lighthouse*:

And this, Lily thought, taking the green paint on her brush, this making up scenes about them is what we call “knowing” people . . . ! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same. She went on tunnelling her way into her picture, into the past. (258)

More troubling than this initial ambivalence over the formalist author’s relationship to her text, however, what finally undermined Woolf’s allegiance to formalism concerned its insistence on the aesthetic as a realm completely apart from other experience. I have dwelt on the potential of this position to release art from the confines of patriarchal fantasy fulfillment. There is, however, an attendant sacrifice on two fronts. First is the loss, attendant on dismissing as irrelevant the old conventions of mimetic accuracy, of all but the most solipsistic critical criteria—a dilemma, Woolf notes, for the writer no less than the critic (CE 2:181). The significance of “significant form” lies finally in the eye of the beholder, and despite its retention of an earlier vocabulary that assessed good art as more “real,” Bloomsbury could never justify its judgments beyond subjective assertions of harmony, balance, and right

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relations. Woolf does not escape this confusion. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" she praises "real" characters, but "real" she says does not mean "lifelike," leading her to wonder "who are the judges of reality" (CE 1:325). Her review of E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, which appeared in the same year as *To the Lighthouse*, criticized his recourse to "life" as a criterion of judgment:

What is this 'Life' that keeps on cropping up so mysteriously in books about fiction? Why is it absent in a pattern and present in a tea party? (CE 2:53)

But Woolf despaired of finding an arbiter of literary pattern who could "take a stick and point to that tone, that relation in the vanishing pages, as Mr. Roger Fry points with his wand at a line or a color in the picture displayed before him" (CE 2:54). Woolf's complaint, however, invites the question of what qualified Fry as the arbiter of visual pattern, a crisis of critical authority that Bloomsbury countered by asserting the subjectivity of all aesthetic experience, and hence all aesthetic judgment (Bell *Art* 8–10), while at the same time making a somewhat contradictory appeal to inborn "taste."

Unfortunately, it was this latter claim to authoritative critical taste that was taken up in Greenbergian formalism (Greenberg), and now prompts post-modernist attacks on Bloomsbury's "aesthetic eugenics" (Watney "Connoisseur"). Such criticism, however justified, ignores the importance of the other voice in Bloomsbury formalism, which, increasingly in the period after World War I, led to an engaging problematization of critical authority and the acceptance of individual variations of aesthetic response (Bell *Since* 162–69).¹⁷ Woolf's biography of Fry makes much of the variability in his critical judgment, quoting him as saying:

I no longer think that there is a right way or a wrong way of painting . . . every way is right when it is expressive throughout of the idea in the artist's mind. (250)

In a late essay, "The Leaning Tower," Woolf translates this relativism into advice for how prospective authors should read, not a limited catalogue of masterpieces, but "omnivourously, simultaneously, poems, plays, novels, histories, biographies, the old and the new . . . each of us has an appetite that must find for itself the food that nourishes it" (CE 2:181).

If the loss of absolute criteria for the creation and criticism of art could be easily absorbed into a broader ideology of relativism, however, the second sacrifice entailed by belief in the integrity of pure aesthetics

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turned out to be harder to live with. It involved the resignation of art's claim to social relevance. Although Fry and Bell embraced this conclusion during the heady days of early formalism (Fry *Vision* 1–15; Bell *Art* 95–105), the trade-off continued to trouble Woolf, especially during the worsening political climate of the Thirties.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has illuminated the passionate engagement in social issues that characterizes Woolf's writing at this period (Heilbrun, Zwerdling), marking its distance from her earlier formalist exhortations that "writing must be formal," and "books will be deformed and twisted" if the author "will write in a rage where she should write calmly" (*Diary* 2:321; *Room* 72–73). Her struggle to bring art and politics together is most poignantly recorded in her abortive "novel-essay," *The Pargiters*, which she eventually split into *The Years* (1937) and *Three Guineas* (1938).

Despite her failure to unite the aims of the essay and of the novel at this point, Woolf's writings on aesthetics from the Thirties profess her desire to bring the two together. Her essays on the visual arts, likewise, draw away from a rigid formalist insistence on the separation of aesthetics from other realms of experience. In 1930, she closes an essay on her sister's paintings by first asserting the formalist separation of the aesthetic sphere "in which morality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay;" she then, however, reopens the question of art's relationship to morality, which she leaves unanswered: "But is morality to be found there? That was the very question I was asking myself as I came in" ("Recent").¹⁹ In a second essay, drafted four years later but unpublished, Woolf asserted that though her sister represented her subjects as "matter merely: static, statuesque," her art suggests a wide variety of ideas ("Vanessa Bell"). This theme is repeated in the dialogue published as "Walter Sickert" (1934), in which Woolf compares his painting to prose. While the artists in the conversation adhere to a strictly formalist critique of Sickert's work, Woolf insists on a broader view, making the formalist approach simply one among many. As the artist is praised for his skills as a biographer and storyteller, Woolf concludes that Sickert's strength lies in his hybrid approach: "that is why he draws so many different people to look at his pictures" (*CE* 2:243).

Woolf's decision to make Sickert the subject of Bloomsbury's polyvocal ruminations on art is indicative of the group's increasing anxiety over the desirability of a pure formalism. Through the Teens, Sickert had continued his staunchly representational practice, despite Bloomsbury's promotion of abstract painting and formalist theory,

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remaining publicly skeptical of the group's enthusiasm for Matisse, Picasso, and even the "semi-blighted" Cézanne (Sickert). Despite this apparent opposition, however, an increasing respect creeps into Bloomsbury's critical assessments of Sickert. As early as 1920, when Fry looked back on his career, one of his regrets was his underestimation of Sickert (*Vision* 288). In 1921, Clive Bell, insisting Sickert was behind the times, nevertheless, compared him to the artists in "remoter parts of Europe" who up until the seventeenth century continued to create "genuine and interesting" gothic art (*Since* 8). In Woolf's 1934 essay, the voice of the formalist critic is ready to agree that Sickert "is probably the best painter now living in England" (*CE* 2:244). Bloomsbury's ambivalent relationship to Sickert has been misunderstood, and even misrepresented, by art historians with a greater commitment to the purity of the group's formalism than Fry had himself (Harrison). By the time Woolf wrote in praise of the "hybrid" Sickert, Fry, in a demonstration of the disdain for critical authority—including his own—that so endeared him to Woolf (*RF* 278, 284, 292, 295–96), was mounting his own since-ignored challenge to the abstract art and pure formalism that his theories had done so much to promote. Instead, he too upheld the ideal of "hybrid" painting, in which form and narrative combine to greatest effect ("Double").²⁰

Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), emerges from this period of turmoil and revision. Like *To the Lighthouse*, it chronicles a woman's struggle for artistic expression, but *Between the Acts* rewrites the staunch formalism of Woolf's earlier text. In contrast to the neat triliteral symmetry of *To the Lighthouse*—and in defiance of the formalist insistence on formal unity as a prerequisite of art's separation from other realms of experience (Fry *Vision* 31)—the formal structure of *Between the Acts* is left radically incomplete, an abruptly truncated triptych with a first "act" of one hundred pages set in the family, then a second (even longer) that is the pageant, followed by an abbreviated return to the situation of the first, which ends almost before it begins. Where *To the Lighthouse* concludes with the affirmation of the formalist creative process—Lily's solitary realization of her unique vision, the picture unified about its center line—*Between the Acts* ends with a cooperatively produced pageant, the splintered reflection of a disparate audience, and a gramophone that "gurgled *Unity—Dispersity*. It gurgled *Un . . . dis . . .* And ceased" (235). The formal and authorial disunity is emphasized by Woolf's drastic displacement of the narrative voice in the last paragraphs. Isa reflects on her unhappy marriage as if her life were a text like the pageant—"Surely it was time someone invented a

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new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes" (252)—and the novel ends as she confronts her husband: "the curtain rose. They spoke." Suddenly the pageant, itself comprised of a series of vignettes, has become a play within a larger play, initiating an infinite progression where what seems to be life is always revealed as the art within a larger text. In one move, Woolf violently problematizes the vague formalist fusion of "making" and "finding," violates the assumption of authorial individuality, and shatters all semblance of formal closure.

In its direct engagement with themes of violence—the political violence of war and the sexual violence both of rape and within marriage—*Between the Acts* breaks from the usual restraint of Bloomsbury's artistic and literary production.²¹ Woolf's new sense of mission and her impatience with the strict formalism of Bloomsbury's painters emerge in a letter of 1936, where she describes her colleagues as sitting placidly.

looking at pinks and yellows, and when Europe blazes all they do is to screw up their eyes and complain of a temporary glare in the foreground. Unfortunately politics get between one and fiction. (Woolf in Gillespie *Sisters* 47)

Both thematically and formally, *Between the Acts* has less in common with Bloomsbury aesthetics than it does with Woolf's description of the generation of writers who matured in the Thirties. In "The Leaning Tower," composed during her work on *Between the Acts*, Woolf described how older writers were confined to a limited "box of toys," "forced to evade the main themes and make do with diversions." In contrast, books by the Thirties authors reveal "a power which, if literature continues, may prove to be of great value in the future." "Written under the influence of change, under the threat of war," she says, the autobiographical novels and poems by young writers demonstrate their "courage to tell the truth, the unpleasant truth, about [themselves]. That is the first step towards telling the truth about other people." If their poetry is flawed, Woolf suggests, so be it. The task at hand is to prepare the way for "the writers of the next generation" who will not be "a small class of well-to-do young men who have only a pinch, a thimbleful of experience to give us," but will include women and others with different stories to tell (CE 2:178, 181).²² The elimination of anger in favor of the soothing unity of aesthetic closure, which Woolf herself had upheld in earlier years (CE 1:326), now seems a relic of an earlier, more peaceful age.

In *Between the Acts* the elderly, well-meaning Lucy Swithin seems to stand for formalism's foolishly optimistic holism when she is accused by

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her juniors of a wishful "one-making" at the expense of a recognition of suffering:

She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination—one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. If discordant, producing harmony—if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus—she was smiling benignly—the agony of the particular sheep, cow, is necessary and so—she was beaming seraphically . . . —we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. . . . Well, if the thought gave her comfort . . . let her think it. (204)

This passage could be a parody of the optimism in Clive Bell's *Art*, where he assured his pre-World War I readers that though "the ideas of men go buzz and die like gnats," formally significant art lives on in a different realm "of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm" (37, 69). With fascism and a second World War threatening everything she held dear, Woolf was with the young in finding no comfort in these platitudes. In "The Leaning Tower," she wonders aloud about what would have happened had she been a rebellious young author of the Thirties: "What books might I have written myself?" *Between the Acts*, in its angry denial of social or aesthetic harmony, begins to answer that question.

Modern feminists, who have been frustrated by what Adrienne Rich describes in Woolf's *Room of One's Own* as "the tone of a woman . . . determined not to appear angry, who is *willing* herself to be calm [and] detached" (92), may find satisfaction in recognizing the distance between her strict formalism of the Twenties and her writings of the following decade. To see this change as Woolf's complete repudiation of either formalism or its male proponents who were her colleagues in Bloomsbury (Marcus *Art* 73–154), however, is to overlook the feminist component in Woolf's initial attraction to formalism, which she saw as an alternative to established aesthetic conventions. It is also to ignore the open-endedness of formalism, in the hands of Roger Fry, as a highly relative, constantly evolving philosophy responsive to changing conditions. If Woolf passed, as my title suggests, through formalism, the voyage did not leave her unmarked. She took from formalism—from Fry in particular—what she admired, and moved on.

Woolf's diary records, on the same day, the completion of "The Leaning Tower" and a breakthrough in her work on *Between the Acts*: "[I] think I've tapped something perhaps—a new combination of the raw & the lyrical." She goes on immediately to tie this accomplishment to her work on Fry's biography: "I think 2 years at Roger may have

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filled the cistern" (*Diary* 5: 259). If Woolf needed to come to terms with Fry in order to develop her own post-formalist aesthetic, it was not in order to repudiate his influence. On the contrary, telling Fry's story, Woolf seeks to claim his legacy for her project to unite politics and aesthetics. Returning to the question she had asked in 1930 about her sister's painting—"is morality to be found there?"—Woolf now insists on the extra-aesthetic elements in even Fry's strictest formalist pronouncements. Quoting his remarks on the artist's need to avoid the complacency of stereotype or the easy success of facility, she insists, "morality and conduct, even if they are called by other names, are present; eating and drinking and love-making hum and murmur on the other side of the page" (*RF* 228).

Woolf's post-formalism draws on this belief in the unity of aesthetic and social values. While still refusing the exhortations of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy, it engages serious moral issues. And though it rejects a notion of realism constituted as the transmission of authorial (authoritative) knowledge—the detailed catalogue of facts Woolf had earlier satirized in Bennett—it renounces as well formalism's attempt to isolate aesthetic experience, suggesting instead the analogous construct-*edness* of art and life. The patterns that emerge from *Between the Acts* are as much social and political as aesthetic, a connection Woolf draws in her biography of Fry when she uses the example of his own life to challenge his claims for aesthetic purity:

Were they distinct? It seems as if the aesthetic theory were brought to bear upon the problems of private life. Detachment, as he insisted over and over again, is the supreme necessity for the artist. Was it not equally necessary if the private were to continue? That rhythm could only grow and expand if it were detached from the deformation which is possession. . . . It was difficult to put that teaching into practice. Yet in his private life he had . . . forced himself to learn that lesson.²³ (214–15)

The model of artistic creativity Lily Briscoe learned in *To the Lighthouse* is here applied explicitly to life, as Woolf transgresses the letter of formalist doctrine in order to broaden the application of its spirit. Is such post-formalism, especially as it is applied to the founder of formalism himself, an anti-formalism that rejects his teaching or an ultra-formalism that seeks to extend its implications beyond the aesthetic realm? To borrow the final words of Fry's *Vision and Design*:

Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop.

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NOTES

My thanks to Patricia Joplin for inspiration, to Carolyn Heilbrun for encouragement, to Diane Filby Gillespie and Brenda Silver for advice, and to Chris Castiglia for all of these, "plus love."

¹ My characterization of the feminist critique of American formalism has been synthesized out of a diverse literature, and informed by my acquaintance with works in progress by Ann Gibson, Jonathan Katz, and Kenneth Silver, to all of whom I am grateful. Their work will help to fill the need, noted by Anne M. Wagner, for studies of "the general issues presented by the language of criticism in the 1940's—its sexual stereotypes and expectations." This lack is all the more remarkable in comparison to the significant body of scholarship treating the rhetoric of abstract expressionism in the political context of the Cold War (Frascina). On the contradictions between the masculinist assumptions of Abstract Expressionism and the careers of women artists of the period see Wagner's essay, as well as Parker and Pollock, 144–51.

² The lingering strength of this attitude is demonstrated by Feaver.

³ References to *Roger Fry* are cited as RF.

⁴ On Bloomsbury's abstract painting of this period, see Watney, *English* 93–107.

⁵ Woolf allows this diary entry to reveal more about her ambivalently literary approach to art than does a letter to her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, describing the same visit to the National Gallery (*Letters* 2: 260; Gillespie "Oh").

⁶ Quick purposes "largely personal reasons" for Woolf's new fondness for Fry at this time (552–55, 568). Without denying their importance, I am tracing the intellectual component of what was both a personal and professional rapprochement.

⁷ These are the first mentions of Fry in the context of art criticism in Woolf's diaries. Hereafter Fry becomes an increasingly prominent and more interesting presence in the diaries (1: 134, 140–41, 225). The collected letters of both Fry and Woolf reveal the same burgeoning intimacy.

⁸ Marder is anxious to prove that Woolf did not allow her feminism to contaminate the formalist purity of her art, while Stubbs charges formalism with constraining Woolf's feminism. A disturbing tendency in recent feminist criticism has been to see Woolf's entire involvement with Bloomsbury as incompatible with her feminism. Marcus's introduction to *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* proclaims, "Her work and life ought to be wrenched out of their provincial English Bloomsbury setting," a stance which ignores Woolf's self-identification with the group, her voluminous correspondence with its members, and her eulogistic biography of Fry. On this brand of feminist revision of Woolf, see my "Bloomsbury Bashing." Other feminist critics working to expand on Moi's brilliant but brief introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics*, which seeks to link Woolf's feminism to her modernism, have, nevertheless, reinforced the rupture between Woolf and formalism by choosing nonformalist definitions of modernism—all anachronistic to Woolf's stated views. Transue splits Woolf from Bloomsbury (12) and proposes instead a Freudian model for the modernism she argues Woolf used to mask or "filter" her feminism "into an art unfettered by the tone of grievance" (15). Bowlby leaves the whole concept of "modernism" only operationally defined by allusions to "stream of consciousness" (6), flux, and constant change (120), none of which

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are active concepts within Bloomsbury's formalism. In contrast, Minow-Pinkney says Woolf rejected both stream-of-consciousness and "fragmentation" in favor of a modernism which, as she defines it, is very close to Bloomsbury's formalism, though this connection is never drawn, let alone explored (2-4). Furthermore, Minow-Pinkney accepts a basically antagonistic relationship between formalism and feminism, asserting that before 1929 Woolf's feminism was largely "repressed" by her modernism (4-5). The antagonism Woolf scholars throughout the Eighties continued to perceive between feminism and formalism echoes debates that took place between feminist art critics and artists in the previous decade (Hammond).

⁹ References to *Collected Essays* are cited as *CE*.

¹⁰ The feminist strategies of Woolf's pieces on Arnold Bennett are outlined (without reference to her formalism) by Daugherty.

¹¹ An interesting connection between Woolf's strategy here and the precedent provided by Bloomsbury's formalist critics is provided by a comparison of her arguments with those in Clive Bell's pacifist pamphlet, *Peace at Once*, which the government seized and burned in 1915. Bell contrasts the abstractions privileged in patriarchal culture—"National Honour," "Civilization," "The Cross," and "Nietzsche"—to the everyday pleasures of "picture palaces and music halls, or sauntering in fine weather through the parks," which might be enjoyed by the young men who were being sent to the front and killed. Bell concludes the latter are more real than—and not worth sacrificing to—the former.

¹² Pioneering and admirably accessible texts include Berger; Nochlin and Hess; and Kent and Morreau, especially Kent's "Looking Back." Much feminist work on the assumptions of representation and viewing draws heavily on film theory, in particular on Mulvey.

¹³ On Fry's willingness to insist on this distinction, even to a fellow art historian, see Kenneth Clark's introduction to Fry *Last Lectures* xvi-xvii.

¹⁴ My reading of Auerbach is strongly indebted to Joplin "Art."

¹⁵ Another token of Fry's influence on *To the Lighthouse* is that Mrs. Ramsay's much-discussed creation, the Boeuf en Daube, was one of his specialties (Spalding 128). That the dish was not for Woolf the old family specialty she asserts it was for Mrs. Ramsay (*Lighthouse* 151) is evident from Vanessa Bell's first reaction to the book, which included the inquiry, echoed by many subsequent readers, "But how do you make Beouf en Daube?" (V. Bell to V. Woolf, 11 May 1927, ms., Berg Collection, New York Public Library). An answer is provided in Wolfe 234-35.

¹⁶ References to *The Complete Shorter Fiction* are cited as *CSF*.

¹⁷ Bywater argues that an acceptance of a diversity of aesthetic responses was always inherent in Bell's theory (77-79).

¹⁸ A good explication of Woolf's conflict is Michèle Barrett's introduction to *Woolf Women and Writing*. Woolf in her 1940 biography of Fry takes pains to explain away his "Art and Life" essay as a psychological strategy for surviving World War I by asserting that great art can arise from dire cultural conditions (214).

¹⁹ For the formalist defense of art's separation from morality, see Fry *Vision* 21-27; Bell *Art* 106-17.

²⁰ That this 1933 essay was only published in 1969, and then in an abridged

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version, while the 1920 *Vision and Design*—like Bell's 1914 *Art*—has gone through numerous editions, is indicative of art scholarship's unwillingness to recognize a post-formalist Roger Fry.

²¹ The thematic violence and formal disunity of *Between the Acts*, though remarkable in their Bloomsbury context, develop tendencies implicit in Woolf's previous novel, *The Years* (Naremore). An excellent analysis of Woolf's authorial strategies in a political context is provided in Joplin "Authority." Joplin, however, exaggerates Woolf's difference from others in Bloomsbury, especially Leonard Woolf, whose *Barbarians at the Gate* expresses the attitudes Joplin attributes to Virginia Woolf alone.

²² Here Woolf makes more forceful a point she had made in her 1932 "Letter to a Young Poet," where she admires the violence of contemporary poetry, despite its lack of "beauty."

²³ Compare Woolf's short essay on Fry (*Moment* 86).

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Punishing Morton Fullerton: Louis Auchincloss's "The 'Fulfillment' of Grace Eliot"

ADELINE R. TINTNER

Louis Auchincloss, the prolific novelist and short-story writer, has always been a reliable guide to Edith Wharton, both the writer and the person. His admirable biography, *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (1971), is doubly readable because of the author's familiarity through kinship and friendship with Wharton's associates, through lifelong collecting, and through sympathy as a fellow writer in the same tradition as his subject.

Not as well known are Auchincloss's two "Edith" tales, based on important revelations about Wharton's private life. The first story, "The Arbiter," was published in the collection *The Winthrop Covenant* in 1976, just a year after R.W.B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975), in which details about Edith and Teddy's private life (as well as the identification of her lover) were revealed. The tale is an invention in which Auchincloss sees Teddy Wharton as Edith's victim, one who magnanimously gives in to her drive to live her life as her genius dictates. It is a defense of Teddy, written around the facts of their lives transposed to fit the conditions of the book's main theme, the heirs of the Winthrop family. Teddy sacrifices himself to Edith's superiority and is aware of the fact that she has given herself the role of martyr without just cause. Neither Teddy, as portrayed in the character of Bob Guest, nor Ada Guest, the Edith character, are accurate facsimiles of the Wharton couple, nor are they meant to be. But they behave amid circumstances very close to the real-life conditions of both Teddy and Edith. The Henry James circle, the flat in Paris, the necessity of Edith's

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need to free herself from the encumbrances of her New York life, as well as her need to victimize Teddy to achieve her freedom, are admirably represented within the somewhat changed, but essentially faithful, representation.¹

The second Edith story by Auchincloss, like "The Arbiter," was probably also occasioned by a major find in Wharton scholarship. "The 'Fulfillment' of Grace Eliot" was one of the collection called *Skinny Island* (1987). It followed the publication of Edith's letters to her lover Morton Fullerton in *The Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* at Austin in 1985. The exposure of Edith's emotional suffering at the hands of Fullerton, a man unworthy of her love, appears to have triggered this tale. As Bob Guest (Teddy in an adapted form) in "The Arbiter" assumes Teddy's character, so Leonard Esher, who has had the affair with Grace Eliot in this tale, and who finds that affair a bore, takes on the characteristics of both Walter Berry and Morton Fullerton in his fictive realization. Grace Eliot (the Edith Wharton character) is a figure of a lesser dimension than her real-life model, as Ada Guest had been in "The Arbiter." The format of a trio of two men and a woman appears again, only this time it is Leonard Esher and Bertie, Grace's literary agent and executor (who acts as an admirer of Grace and her work and who is shocked by her loving a bounder), who are related by their feelings about Grace. This, in form, is a repetition of the relationship of Bob Guest and Adam Winthrop (Egerton) in "The Arbiter."

The first-person narrator, Bertie, echoes the effect of the publication of the real letters that Edith wrote to Fullerton in the first sentence of the tale: "The quiet, even roll of my retirement days . . . has been rudely shattered by my discovery of Grace Eliot's love letters," just as the discovery of the real Wharton letters had been a shock to Wharton's readers in 1985. Even though the "name of the late great novelist has long been linked with that of Leonard Esher," before that discovery "no one but myself could have proved that Grace and he had been lovers." Grace's agent, "disciple and worshiper," had been "silent" about this affair because he thought that Grace had soon recovered "from a momentary lapse of taste and judgment," and had really forgotten about this episode (SI 181).²

The passionate letters, five of which are discovered by Bertie in a package of photos of pet dogs ("kenneled with curs"), prove otherwise. When Auchincloss reconstructs Edith's love letters, he deviates from a literal version of those that Edith wrote, although his parody does connect one particular letter with Edith's bad poetry. It begins, "O love of my life, imagine Brunhild . . . awakening to the silver clarion of

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Siegfried's horn only to discover that she is . . . old!" (SI 183). Compare this with an actual letter Edith wrote to Fullerton: "If I had been younger and prettier, everything might have been different" (LC 31).³ Among the transformations from the historical affair is the change in time, for now it is 1946 and the site is New York City. The figure of Grace is unlike Edith's. She is "forty, tall, fair . . . willowy," with rich, golden hair. Her lover, unlike Fullerton, who was three years her junior, is assimilated more closely to Walter Berry, who was three years her elder, and who had always been suspected, before 1975 and Lewis's biography, of being Edith's lover, and who fits better into the picture of Leonard Esher. Here he is "at least ten years older" than Grace, and the image of Esher is close to the image of Berry from the photographs we are familiar with: "Grey hair and cold grey-blue eyes, so nattily dressed as to seem almost a parody of himself," a "thin figure" like Berry on whom "the shallow 'villains' of her fiction were modeled." Like Berry, he was a "constant, cool presence . . . judging everything and everybody" (SI 184). Again, as in "The Arbiter," the narrator sees how "academics, scholars, critics . . . will snatch at any lubricious bits of sexuality to bring the supreme artists down to their own pawing, clutching level" (SI 194). A number of examples are predicted from imagined future scholarship: one of them is "Grace emerged from the love affair a completed woman and a greater artist."

Then Bertie recounts how the affair happened. It began at a party in the Eliots' "big double brownstone on Forty-eighth Street" (SI 185), a conversion and reversal of the little double brownstone on Eighty-fourth Street and Park Avenue where Edith Wharton lived. Andy Eliot, Grace's husband, another more muscular version of Teddy, and a prouder and more complacent one, acts as host. Grace tells Bertie that she "has discovered something in her own heart that means more to her than any book she's ever written" (SI 187). Bertie, who doesn't believe this, is told by her, "Oh, the densities of incomprehension—the densities!" (SI 187). These words have been taken by Auchincloss from a letter Wharton wrote to her friend Margaret Chanler, once in Auchincloss's possession and now at Yale. The letter is a reply to Mrs. Chanler's response to Wharton's novel *A Mother's Recompense*. Edith had asked her to explain "Why you like my books. . . . To know why is a subtle consolation for densities of incomprehension" (Love 58).

At the party Bertie is approached by "the tall, elegant figure of Leonard Esher like a peer in a Sargent portrait. At least he always struck me as having just changed from a scarlet huntsman's jacket" (SI 188). Here Auchincloss invokes the well-known John Singer Sargent

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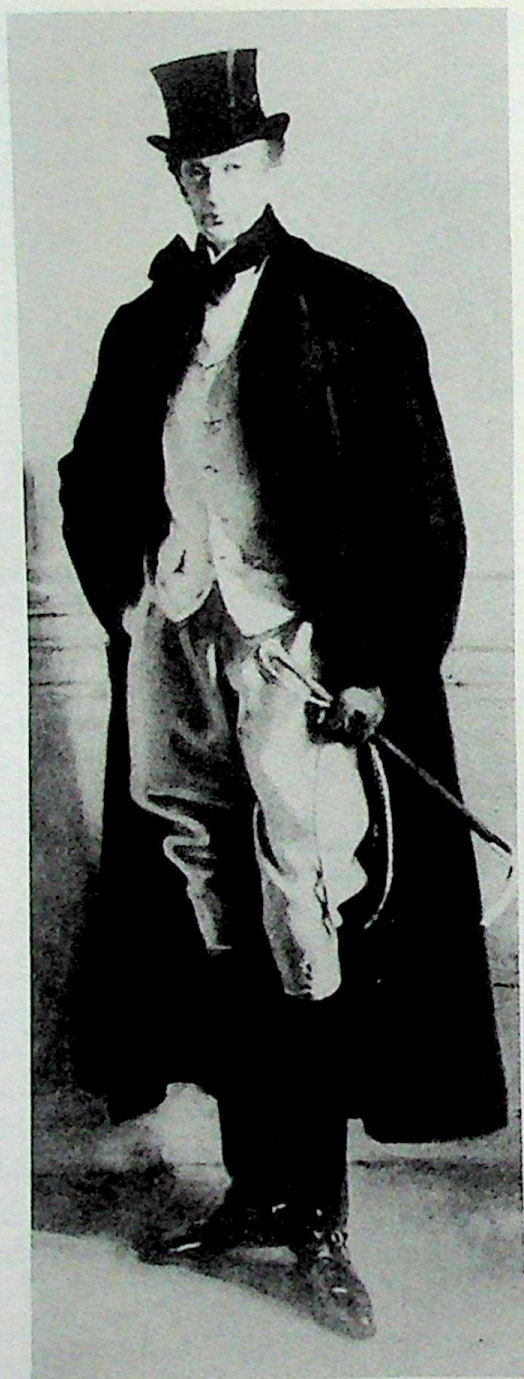
portrait of Lord Ribblesdale in the Tate Gallery in his hunting clothes. Esher, a snob and usually inattentive to the lower-born agent, is quite ingratiating, since he wants a favor from him, that is, the loan of his flat for the affair Esher is about to conduct with Grace. Before this, Grace is shown trying "perhaps to emulate a Mucha poster of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet" with her hand up to her breast (*SI* 187). The two images from the world of art give life to the two participants in this love affair.

Bertie is insulted by this request for his flat and its implication that it is safe to conduct an affair in his apartment because "people think me such a eunuch" (*SI* 189). This summons up shades of Henry James, whose sexuality was ambiguous even to his friends. The fact that James chaperoned the clandestine meeting between Mrs. Wharton and Fullerton at the Charing Cross Hotel seems to be the real-life antecedent for this part of the tale.

After a few weeks Esher tells Bertie that the affair is over and gives him back his keys. He cautions him, "Never get involved with a middle-aged virgin. They have too much to make up for. . . . My God, was I ever tossed about! There were moments when I actually considered setting off your fire alarm!" (*SI* 192). At this caddish remark, Bertie finally erupts in anger. "You great clown, don't you know you have no existence except what Grace has given you?" (*SI* 192). The story winds down with a quotation from another letter by Grace to Esher, parts of which have been taken from Edith's letter Number Two in the *Library Chronicle* (22). Here first is the fictive letter: "Oh, my lover, however little I may have given you, be assured that it was all I had. Had I been wiser I might have hoarded it and doled it out in smaller portions, but I could not do so. I opened my vault, my doors, my cupboards, my windows; I flung every gold piece and copper piece that I had at your feet. . . . Imprudent maybe but I care not. I shall be forever grateful" (*SI* 192).

The letter from Edith to Fullerton is as follows: "And I'm so afraid that the treasures I long to unpack for you, that have come to me in magic ships from enchanted islands, are only, to you, the old familiar red calico & beads of the clever trader, who has had dealings of every latitude, & now knows just what to carry in the hold to please the simple native—I'm so afraid of this, that often I stuff my shining treasures back into their box, lest I should see you smiling at them!" (*LC* 22). Although the exaggerated triviality of Grace's letter is in great contrast to the labored but colorful and poetic image Edith used in her letter, one can see what fun Auchincloss has had in producing very amusing and clever samples of Edith-type love letters. The pessimism of the real letter is in

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(Left:) John Singer Sargent, "Lord Ribblesdale" (1902). By permission of the Tate Gallery, London.

(Right:) Alphonse Mucha, "Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet" (1899). Poster for the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt: "Tragique Histoire d'Hamlet, Prince de Danemark." *The Graphic Work of Alphonse Mucha*. Ed. Jiri Mucha. New York: St. Martin's, 1973. Fig. 88, p. 63.

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contrast to the optimism of Grace's letter, which ends: "When you look with the kindly patience of an uncle whose little niece still believes in Santa Claus, I'll murmur under my breath 'Bless you for not telling me he's a fable. Bless you for letting me pretend a little longer.'" Bertie's response to this is, "Grace! Really! And I must read that in the *Hamilton Review* and the *Dartington Quarterly*?" And he must, because these letters have to "be entered into the record."

As in "The Arbiter," Wharton's dimensions have been reduced for the purposes of fiction. As the prize over which the two men are fighting, one who reverences her and the other who belittles her, her personality has been somewhat vulgarized in the present story. We are meant to concentrate on the lack of response by Fullerton-cum-Berry to Edith's passion, rather than on Grace's true correspondence to Edith. Actually, the five letters had been sent back to Grace Eliot by Esher in a more gentlemanly act than Fullerton was capable of, for he never sent back Edith's letters, even though she made many requests for him to do so, and in the end they were sold and became public property. Grace Eliot herself is thus not an accurate portrait of Edith, nor is she meant to be. There is just enough of her yet transposed to the present to make her recognizable, especially in her relationship with her husband and lover. The words Auchincloss puts into Esher's mouth have no basis in reality, but their tenor has, for the fact is that we know them inferentially from Edith's letters.

The narrator's vision of how the letters will be used by scholars in learned journals ("Could I not already imagine the phrases in the literary journals . . . 'Grace emerges from the love affair a completed woman and a greater artist'") (*SI* 184) corresponds to a similar situation in "The Arbiter." It also tallies with the published accounts of Auchincloss's feelings about the matter, for he thought that Edith Wharton's fiction should not be read in the light of her love affair, which must be separated from her professional work. It is Bertie's fear that like "Emily Dickinson's [being] bedded with a minister and poor old Henry James doing the unmentionable with a young sculptor," academics will surely see the fiction as reflecting the love affair. Auchincloss parodies their comments: "After that year a warm roseate streak makes its unmistakable appearance in the once cool marble of her perfect prose." In this imagined quotation we see a reflection of Auchincloss's own beliefs, and his prediction has turned out to be true.

We may also see in the two portraits brought into the tale as pictorial equivalents of Grace Eliot and her lover that Auchincloss is satisfying his own desire to illustrate fiction with representative works of

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art. He wrote recently in a review, "I should enjoy seeing an edition of James's work illustrated with Sargent's portraits," and went on to select the Sargents he would use for specific works of James's fiction, among them "Lord Ribblesdale for Lady Barberina's father," a lord heavily addicted to blood sports (Review 29). Here is where Walter Berry as material for his Leonard Esher comes through the Sargent portrait, for Berry was a long, lean man like Ribblesdale and was actually a friend of the peer and his wife. Surely the Sargent portrait summons up Berry rather than James's Lord Canterville, and Auchincloss's witty eye saw immediately the astonishing resemblance with the known photographs of Berry. (Lady Ribblesdale had contributed to the opinion Auchincloss quotes concerning the character of Walter Berry in his biography of Edith Wharton [158].) Fullerton, we know, was a short man and, to judge from his pictures, of an entirely different type. Berry, therefore, comes in for his share of chastisement for his cold and stand-offish attitude to Edith, although he was a friend interested in her activities.

The choice of the Mucha poster of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet also satisfies the hair color of the real Edith, which was red-gold like Sarah's, and Sarah's gesture of hands crossed on her breast resembles the gesture, somewhat theatrical, which Grace Eliot (if not Edith) makes in this tale.

As in "The Arbiter," the character of Edith is fictionalized, so that she appears as a kind of caricature of herself, and her moving letters to Fullerton are travestied to fit in with the kind of writing we see only in Wharton's poetry, that is, in her poorest work. However, the kind of burlesque of Edith's prose in the first of the two letters Auchincloss has invented for his Grace Eliot, in which she imagines herself Brunhild and her lover Siegfried, is reminiscent of Henry James's parody of Wharton's *The Fruit of the Tree* in his tale "The Velvet Glove" (249-50). James, although one of Edith's best friends and sincerest admirers, was also one of her harshest critics. But Auchincloss, as a creative writer thoroughly grounded in James and Wharton scholarship, clearly enjoyed getting in line with James as a parodist of Wharton.

"The 'Fulfillment' of Grace Eliot" serves as a pendant to Auchincloss's earlier Edith Wharton story and exists as a comment on the latest revelatory publication of the discoveries of Edith's personal life. Again, it illuminates how the imaginative processes of a gifted writer like Auchincloss—the biographer of Wharton as well as a collector of Wharton materials, an inheritor of anecdotes from members of her own set and admirer of her extraordinary gifts—apply themselves. Naturally, as a fictive report, there is elimination, as well as

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exaggeration. There is a fusing of Berry and Fullerton, and the ironic suggestion of Percy Lubbock and even of Auchincloss himself (both brilliant critics of E.W.) in the character of the first-person narrator. Grace, with her quotations from *Hamlet* (SI 187) and her theatrical gestures, is said to feel that her love affair meant more to her "than any book she's ever written." I do not believe that either Auchincloss or a reader would believe that of Edith, although we suspend our disbelief when we read this tale in which such a need for sexual fulfillment is given as a characteristic of Grace Eliot. As in "The Arbiter" we are here treated to a triangle of two men and a woman, a format in which there is one man who acts as the admiring champion Edith seems to have missed in real life, at least during the time she was involved with Fullerton. In this tale there is enough of the real Edith to create a justification for her deep feelings in her affair with Fullerton. We are invited to roast the two men who caused her great suffering, Fullerton especially, but also, in certain overtones, Walter Berry. This time, the story is both about justice to Edith Wharton, and a condemnation of the sexual adventurer Morton Fullerton seems to have been. The quotation marks around "Fulfillment" in the title are also a comment on those critics who view the affair as such.

Auchincloss has made his "Edith" heroine less like Edith herself than are the women in the other tales in *Skinny Island*, women whose biographies do not repeat Edith's, but whose characters resemble hers in their strengths, their imperiousness, and their interest in ideas or art, chafing under marital restraints, enfranchised by widowhood and seen as either unattached basically to their children or passionately attached, as the case may be. Auchincloss is the Balzac of Edith's world more than her own fiction is.

The "Edith" tale also is determined by its place in this collection of stories. "The 'Fulfillment' of Grace Eliot" is the tenth tale in a collection of a dozen, which, like those in *The Winthrop Covenant*, advance in years, here from 1875 to the present day (1987). Story by story it shows how New Yorkers of the WASP world, rich and powerful figures, react to the changes in their society that three wars, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II, bring to them. We see how they handle and mishandle the problems created by those changes. They reflect the concerns of people like Edith Wharton and her heirs in many of her attitudes and prejudices. Her demanding personality and her charm are equally expressed in the women characters whose strong natures inhabit these pages.

In the first story Adam Peltz, who keeps "A Diary of New York" in

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1875 and whose grandsire was a friend of John Hay and Hamilton, initiates a tradition. The last story ends with Lucian Day, an effete descendant who, with his ex-wife in the nineteen-eighties, attempts without success to control Peter Chisholm, an ethnically ambiguous genius, "the avenging angel" of the corporate takeover. He is the conqueror of the residue of the older social culture of New York, a man of "shadowy" social and ethnic origins, but one who has gained control of the city's financial machinery. He collects art and, in contrast to Peltz, who, more than a hundred years ago, lived on Washington Square and owned a "great Sully portrait of President Washington," lives in a penthouse on Central Park West and is learning how to be an art collector, because it is the thing to be now.

It is interesting that the eight stories between these two have their own pictorial and artistic equivalents as well. Peter Chisholm in the last story has to be told what he should like in art ("Would Meyer Schapiro approve of Vigée-LeBrun?"). When he is confronted by a picture by Walter Gay, a painter of interiors, "one of those exquisite expatriates of Edith Wharton's world," who was a close friend of Edith Wharton and who painted her and her friends' rooms, he does not know what to make of it. Lucian Day owns part of a gallery, and his ex-wife, Abbie, thinks what Chisholm should buy is some Scythian gold for his tomb, where he "would be buried with his cattle and horses and wives, all walled up alive with his jewel-decked corpse!" which is exactly the situation Abbie finds herself in. The *ancien régime* is now bested by intruders, an accurate picture of the shift in social control within Manhattan, the "Skinny Island," in the last hundred years.

There seems to be a uniformity about the narrative technique in this collection, since each tale contains its own illustrations, its gallery drawn from art, examples which exhibit the taste of the particular decade the story illuminates. In the story placed in 1900, "The Wedding Guest," the taste is for Nattier portraits. In the story that takes place around the years of the First World War, we meet a Greek Revival villa and in that of the nineteen-thirties a Palladian villa. In the nineteen-forties tale, a character is likened to a Daumier and the women are Boldinis. The tale about two artists in the nineteen-fifties concentrates on abstract painting. In the tale placed in the nineteen-sixties, the painting of Martin Heade is now a new taste, an historically accurate fact. In "The Reckoning," the plot is devoted to a collector of paintings by Arshile Gorky, Adolf Gottlieb, and others of that school. This allows us not to be surprised when we get to the next tale that the Sargent portrait and the Mucha poster are those that were popular in

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the *fin de siècle*, the true period of Edith's love affair with Fullerton. "Lord Ribblesdale" by Sargent was painted in 1902 and Mucha's "Bernhardt as Hamlet" in 1899. These pictures do not represent the taste of the time during which the fictive love affair takes place, that of 1946, but of the period of the real affair between Edith and her lover, although Sargent and Mucha are now both again having their own revivals.

The fiction of Louis Auchincloss must be required reading of every Whartonian, for, with his keen "painter's eye" and his careful illustration of almost every aspect of the life of his own class and a particular sector of New York society, he gives us a more accurate picture of the world from which Edith came than many of her novels or stories do. In order to understand her peculiarities, her prejudices and her drives, we must see their equivalents in the women who resemble her moving in the society that nurtured her. Auchincloss's fiction cannot explain Wharton's fiction, but it can and does explain Edith Wharton.

NOTES

¹ For a more detailed analysis of "The Arbiter," see Adeline R. Tintner, "Justice to Teddy Wharton: Louis Auchincloss's 'The Arbiter.'" *Edith Wharton Review* VII.2 (1990): 17-19.

² References to *Skinny Island* are cited as *SI*.

³ References to *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* are cited as *LC*.

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“Only Connect”: Logical Aesthetic of Fragmentation in *A Word Child*

CATHERINE E. HOWARD

Both Iris Murdoch's *A Word Child*, despite her claims to the contrary, and E. M. Forster's *Howards End* deal in philosophical ideas. In addition, their goals remain the same, the attainment of a state of appreciation for the value of hope and love, even though the emphasis in *Howards End* is on connecting and in *A Word Child* on disconnecting. Murdoch states in a 1977 interview, “I can’t be sure, of course, but I don’t feel any wave of influence there. I don’t think philosophy influences my work as a novelist.”¹ Yet she recognizes the philosophical function of literature, since “In morals and politics we have stripped ourselves of concepts. Literature, in curing its own ills, can give us a new vocabulary of experience and a truer picture of freedom.”² Claiming that “We need a new vocabulary of attention,” she states in 1961, “It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy.”³

In this way in the early sixties, Murdoch recognizes and takes on the chore Richard Rorty assigns to the philosopher in the 1980s.⁴ No longer can philosophical questions be addressed solely by the dry philosophical essay. Frederick J. Hoffman concurs:

Philosophy and art never exactly touch or converge in Miss Murdoch’s work. This is partly because the two disciplines remain adamantly apart, and have quite different tones. But she is also responsible for a “feminine” view of philosophy. She says, in many ways, to her masculine colleagues: let’s have done with this abstracting nonsense and see how human beings do, after all, torture one another; perhaps if we do, we can see eventually how they may come to *love* one another. (20)

It is precisely this task which concerns Murdoch still, ten years later, in *A Word Child*.

There is no question that Hilary Burde tortures those he loves—or is supposed to love—and that he himself is tormented by love, partly because of fate and partly because of his reactions to the hand dealt him. At the same time, the point of the novel, like the point of *Howards End*, is that preservation of hope and love is the key to a meaningful existence. Though similar in message, the two works differ in means of getting the message across. *A Word Child* documents the falling apart of an individual, whereas *Howards End* illustrates the centripetal force of a group of people. The Schlegels, especially Margaret, recognize the coming together of opposing forces: of Schlegels and Wilcoxes, of rich and poor, of masculine and feminine, of city and country. Hilary, with no such recognition (and, indeed, there is less coming together in this novel), tries to make discrete members of a group fit together artificially into a framework of scheduled “days.” It is only when this pattern disintegrates that the members actually become connected, primarily through association with Hilary. He who has attempted to make the pieces of his puzzle fit together while remaining entirely separate from one another becomes the agent of their amalgamation into each other.

Both books show German philosophical influences; these influences, however, are quite far removed from each other. *Howards End* takes its cue from the aestheticism of the German Romantic Schlegel, while *A Word Child* stems from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later linguistic analysis phase. The first concerns itself with finding depth and “meaning” in life, the second entirely with examination of surfaces. Thus, Hilary is preoccupied with forms, with patterns. He states,

I relied upon routine, had done so perhaps ever since I realized that grammatical rules were to be my salvation; and since I had despaired of salvation, even more so. Routine, in my case at least, discouraged thought. Your exercise of free choice is a prodigious stirrer up of your reflection. The patterned sameness of the days of the week gave a comforting sense of absolute subjection to history and time.⁵

Subjection to history is extremely important to Hilary, tied in with his idea of his fate and his debt to it; his sister’s alteration of his conception of his past near the end of the novel contributes to his falling apart and to the fragmentation of his Weltanschauung. It is no accident on Murdoch’s part that he has been “saved” by grammar, by a teacher who discovered his talent for learning languages; the Wittgensteinian

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emphasis on grammar and language games appears in Hilary's anti-Romantic recognition of the folly of depth seeking.

Murdoch cautions the reader against Hilary's hyper-devotion to routine, though. One critic points out that she, along with John Fowles, sees the dangers of forms in aesthetic concerns—that imposition of “fantastic forms or concepts upon contingent reality, including other real people” results in ethically reprehensible domination of one over others,⁶ which is exactly what has happened in Hilary's case. *A Word Child*, then, even though it remains very different from *Howards End*, particularly regarding fragmentation, discovers the same conclusion—that humans should communicate with one another, connect. Hilary: “‘I'm getting used to weddings, I rather enjoy them’” (391). In *A Word Child*, an artificially forced centripetal motion explodes into a new and useful coherent whole when approached from another angle, from another language game. However, analysis of surfaces is the key; even less than in *Howards End*, there is no one true meaning. An examination of technique, philosophical ideas, and lesson in the two novels affords the reader a new appreciation for Hilary's discovery in light of Forster's pronouncement “Only connect. . . .”

Perhaps the most similar technical component in these books is the element of surprise. Both Forster and Murdoch make extensive use of shocking the reader, usually with blithe comment on the totally unexpected event. Forster casually mentions only sixty-eight pages into the book that the funeral of the main character is over, for instance.⁷ Murdoch uses the same technique, reversed, by dropping clues about Hilary's sexuality that prove to be false. In the beginning, the reader notes that Hilary lives with a charming boy, whom he describes in glowing terms, and of whom he is obviously fond, despite his sometimes harsh words. Hilary claims, however, that he does not know whether the boy is gay or not. Letters from a “Tommy” come for Hilary; these turn out to be from his girlfriend Thomasina. After a dinner episode with friends who have invited both him and his superior at his office, Clifford Larr, complete with statements from Hilary like “‘I don't know anything about him,’” Hilary turns up sixty-two pages later with his own key to this man's apartment, is called “darling” by him, and confides in him, before stating, “We were not lovers, of course. I was irredeemably heterosexual” (73).

The confusion continues, though. Hilary makes statements like “It seemed to be my week for making love to girls. Most unusual” (168), and one recalls his dictum to Christopher about no girls: “Girls in the flat would have disturbed me” (3). About the possibility of being

"crushed against a bosomy typist" in the tubes, he claims, "This could not please me. Female forms and faces were, in this stuffy insipid proximity, if anything more terrible" (203). Hilary's sexual preferences remain somewhat a mystery. He is obviously attracted in some degree by his sister Crystal; he remains for the most part cold toward his girlfriend Tommy, especially when she mentions marriage; at the same time almost all his problems in the novel have been caused by steamy affairs with the two wives of Gunnar Jopling.

Like the surprise in *Howards End* of Helen's pregnancy by Leonard Bast, Crystal's loss of virginity to Gunnar Jopling is an unexpected revelation. Again, two members of opposite social classes meet, but the genders are switched. Murdoch makes use of the unexpected on a small scale, as well. This affair is an inversion of Hilary's love for Anne, which is for him emotional but viewed in a physical light; for Crystal and Gunnar the love is physical, but she sees it in an emotional light. She states, "You know, he is the only man who ever did that"—not made love to her, but—"kissed my hand" (253).

A different use of technique in *A Word Child* than in *Howards End* is Hilary's untrustworthiness. Unlike the narrator of *Howards End*, who seems to be quite reliable, Hilary often misrepresents himself. For example, he claims, "I had no instinct to play the man as layer down of the law" (8), yet he soon proves himself wrong, indicating he "had trained Tommy well" (59), totally controlling her life. The same goes for Crystal. "I had trained her so well that I knew she would not communicate with me, could not alter the routine one iota" (258). He states of Tommy and Crystal, "They could both read me as dogs read their master, probably noticing tiny traits of behavior of which I was myself unconscious" (58). Tommy is like the smart, friendly collie dog they meet in the park (179): totally devoted, despite possible harsh words. Hilary is not necessarily less likable for this tendency to domination; it is interesting to note that in the social hierarchy Clifford, in turn, has trained *him* (79).

Murdoch spins a web of clues, both accurate and misleading, throughout the novel. Her Indian references to Biscuit, for example, are infinitely more complex than Forster's repetition of themes and phrases such as "hands on the ropes" (29, 30, 42, 81) or 11 November as both Leonard's birthday and Charles and Dolly's anniversary (41, 54). Foreshadowing of Christopher's and Biscuit's union comes as early as page three, where the reader discovers Christopher is learning to play the tabla, an Indian drum. Crystal offers Gunnar a chocolate biscuit (251), and Hilary does the same to Jimbo (366). Hilary feels as if Kitty

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has given him the Taj Mahal (345) (she had been given Biscuit as a girl and has, in a way, given her to Hilary for the duration of the first part of the novel). Clifford's Indian miniatures keep recurring (77, 356, 377, 378), and there is an (unmentioned) Indian princess Tiger Lily in *Peter Pan*,⁸ which Hilary's office plans to put on for the Christmas pantomime. In the end, though, Biscuit turns out not to be Indian after all.

Generally, the symbols in *A Word Child* tend to be more obscure than in *Howards End*. Both books have dancing elephants as symbols of transient happiness (*HE*, 24; *WC*, 22), and *Peter Pan* may be read as *A Word Child*'s recurring Fifth Symphony goblin, but beyond that symbols in the two books are rather different. Almost all the names in *A Word Child*, for instance, have secondary meanings, but on a different level than the Schlegels'. Frequently Murdoch inverts the meaning of a name. Hilary Burde is neither hilarious nor free as a bird; with his predilection for riding in circles on the Underground, he seems more like a cave dweller. Crystal is not clearly what she has appeared to be, and one of the most feminine characters in the book is called Tommy. Things are not what they seem. In other instances, though, the clues prove correct. Clifford Larr is on the edge throughout most of the novel; given the book's strong *Lear* references⁹ this reading is not as farfetched as it may first appear. Gunnar Jopling's wives keep dying, though it is not his fault. Arthur Fisch is not, to Hilary's mind, very deep. Laura Impiatt seems impious in her suggestion that the signet ring Clifford wears around his neck might be a cross. Kitty virtually drowns (or at least does not like the water at all). Edith Witcher and Reggie Farbottom comprise the Shakespearian low plot. For the most part, *A Word Child* is more complicated than *Howards End*. The Schlegels see love as a pebble in the waters of life (138ff.); Hilary and Anne see it as a labyrinth: "We had created a maze and were lost. And now we could see the possibilities of pain, our pain and that of others" (121).

As far as ideas go, the two books derive from quite different backgrounds. Paramount for Hilary is logic, in particular the type of categorization that led to Wittgenstein's later linguistic phase. In many ways, though, Hilary never transcends a *Tractatus* stage, hoping always to compartmentalize and control. On some level he realizes the danger of this patterning. "The logical dew was helping me. I felt, myself now, very orderly and very clear and very dreadful" (345), yet he continues to opt for it. "Better the assumed calm of the usual mind-numbing routine" (97). The connection with Wittgenstein is clear, not only in food preferences (9, 86), but also in Hilary's proclivity for language

games of all sorts. Language, according to Wittgenstein, is as much a maze as is Hilary's concept of love: "Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about."¹⁰ Not only is Hilary good at conventional languages, he is also fluent in many types of conversational games at work in this novel. His language for Tommy and his language for Kitty, say, are extremely different, both on a superficial level and on a deeper one. It would seem that Hilary plays a different language game every week, plus office and Underground discourses.

Paramount in importance for the Schlegels is aesthetics. As their name indicates, they are concerned with the literary and aesthetic consciousness in which the noumenal and phenomenal worlds are said to converge. Though Hilary shares their faith in irony, he prefers the false connections, distinctions, and categories of logic. He takes Margaret Schlegel's twist on Matthew Arnold's dictum about the impossibility of seeing life steadily and seeing it whole a step further, ending by seeing it neither steadily nor whole.

"Hilary lives by rules," said Freddie. "He separates everything from everything."

"And everyone from everyone!" said Laura.

"Separation is the essence of a bachelor's existence," I said. (8)

By the end of *A Word Child*, however, Hilary is coming around to Margaret Schlegel's imperative: "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion [which for Hilary seem always to be kept separate], and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die" (*HE*, 147). Beast-monk Hilary has learned the lesson at least well enough to accept the fact that there can be no more "days." Peter Pan in the end, though, it must be remembered, opts for the solitary life. At least on Mondays, Hilary plays Peter to Clifford, storming in and disturbing things, while relating news of an interesting world from outside. That Hilary thinks Gunnar looks old indicates his own failure to age (or to register it), and Clifford replies with the ubiquitous "Darling" pun: "We are all old, my darling" (144-45). In addition, he gives Hilary ice cream and fudge sauce "as a concession to [his] childish tastes" (355), and Hilary replies with a youthful "Oh goodie," which may be simply part of the gay-discourse language game he plays. It seems that Hilary as Peter might remain solitary despite his

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newfound inclination toward socialization. Hilary continues to display a preference for the solitary nature of logic. The key is communication; for the Schlegels, communication through the arts is a means to socialization, to connecting with people; for Hilary, language and discourse represent ends in themselves with socialization as a by-product. At the end of *A Word Child* Hilary has begun to realize the value of socialization as an objective, but he has come to it through language (and the logic of language) rather than through aesthetics.

Hilary is not against aesthetics per se; in fact, he surrounds himself with artists and art, although it sometimes annoys him. Christopher always seems to be singing his *Waterbird* love song, for instance, when Hilary is feeling particularly uncharitable. The young Hilary had an appreciation for art: after Anne's initial rejection, heartbroken Hilary "read poetry and enjoyed the grammar and the poems too" (120). Where he would disagree with the Schlegels, though, is on the Romantic place of aesthetics as first cause. Speaking of the catastrophic turn his life has taken, he says, "And it was not a tragedy. I had not even the consolation of that way of picturing the matter. Tragedy belongs in art. Life has no tragedies" (382). Again, the spheres are kept separate. Art is planned out and controlled by man; life is not, no matter what some think. This view is not existentialism; rather it is chance, randomness, and fate, without an element of freedom even in choice. Hilary's number is up. (Murdoch claims about Sartre, "I was interested in existentialism, but I never held those extreme beliefs about human freedom."¹¹) Hilary intones, "Powers which I had offended were gathering to destroy me" (323).

These two novels share a concern for the irony of fate, and both of them have to do with randomness and patterns. The Schlegels believe in an overall pattern. What happens to them may be random, but it at least *seems* to follow some kind of order. Hilary, on the other hand, is convinced of the utter randomness of the universe. In the novel itself, however, what *seems* random for Hilary often turns out not to be; that is, Biscuit's "chance" appearance, unlike Leonard Bast's forgotten umbrella, has been carefully calculated all along. Murdoch has been accused of unbelievability; she is excused, though, by Hilary's declaration in the second line he speaks: "It was all very improbable however." Such things could happen. Both of these novels have to do with circling, Hilary's more aimless and pointless than the Schlegels'. In *Howards End*, readers are surprised to find events come full circle, whereas in *A Word Child* they expect things to recur on the artificial circle of the Circle Line. Events in this book surprise, too: instead of

recurring as they have for some twenty years, day by day, they change and happen differently, much to Hilary's dismay. It is as if the train has changed lines and is now actually going somewhere.

Jimbo says to Hilary at one point,

"I'm not sure if I do [believe in astrology]. But it seems to me there must be something in it. I mean it stands to reason, everything's caused. Otherwise they wouldn't be able to send space probes to Jupiter. Think of it. They send up this thing and it goes all the way to Jupiter and takes photographs. They couldn't do that if everything wasn't fixed, it would all get lost, wouldn't it. And they can predict eclipses centuries ahead." (367)

Hilary, for all his insistence on randomness, offsets his own argument to some degree by his unsuspecting predictive ability: he says of Gunnar, "I shall pass him on the stairs" (93), and, of course, he does. Hilary misses the mark sometimes, too, though, as with this conversation about Gunnar to Clifford,

"It was for the last time." Was it?

"A lot of last times seem to be happening in your life. Is this the last time we shall sit together at this table?"

"No." I stretched my hand across and he gripped it. (356)

—he has it exactly backward, for it *is* the last time he will ever see Clifford, and it is certainly not the last time he will see Gunnar.

Unlike those in *Howards End*, the characters in *A Word Child* spend a lot of time regretting fate and trying to escape it. Hilary: "I saw her bright face changing, losing its joy, and I ground my teeth with despair and fury against the Fates. If only this woman were not married, if only things were different, if only—" (122). Clifford's complaints of not being able to sleep any more (81) and Hilary's assertion that "A talent for oblivion is a talent for survival. I laid my head down and merciful pain-killing sleep covered me fathoms deep. Not to have been born is undoubtedly best, but sound sleep is second best" (15–16) indicate the escape route, but at some point, escape is no longer possible (cf. Hilary's exam nightmare, 82), except permanently. There are two suicides in this novel, both by sleeping pills (Osmand 365; Larr 378). Hilary, in his inability to consider this option because of his concern for Crystal, approaches the lesson of *Howards End*.

In spite of Hilary's disconnecting attitude, he begins to see by the end of the novel the importance of happiness and love. Annoyed by Hilary's lack of concern for others, Christopher states, "At least I haven't given up. You simply tread on people. You're a destroyer, a

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murderer—" (230). Hilary is a murderer like Charles Wilcox in that he causes someone's death accidentally. In addition, as Jimbo points out, Hilary murders by destruction of others' self-esteem. Like Henry Wilcox, who indirectly causes the death of Leonard Bast by giving him unsound financial advice that eventually leads to despair on Bast's part, Hilary disconnects with others by treating them as means instead of as ends and by destroying their self-confidence. Tommy recognizes that Hilary himself, as well as she, is affected by such behavior.

"You don't realize how I do everything you want as if I were your slave. I live a stupid life because of you, a life not worthy of a human being, and we might be so happy if only you would. It isn't as if you were happy either, you're wretched, I think you're the most unhappy person I've ever met. Why can't you just decide to be happy for a change? It's that you won't love for some reason, you hold back. You are your own worst enemy. There's a rage in you against all ordinary joys." (210)

It remains unclear whether he will escape despair, but his recognition of love as the key is a beginning. Clifford's "*Non amo, ergo non ero*" (80) is replaced by Jimbo's gift of the cross Laura Impiatt once thought might hang around Clifford's neck, yet Hilary remains at sea. "I could see that Jimbo's silly visit and Jimbo's silly cross were a little piece of the purest kindness; but it could not touch me. Christ himself, I felt, could not have touched me then, not because I was so wicked, but because I was so mortally sad" (368). The only two times in the whole novel Hilary is actually happy are when he makes love to Tommy:

I laughed [the only time he does in the entire book]. Then I made love to her. And in the transporting joy of love seemed to find a sudden fated issue from all the terrors that had been obsessing me. The world, for a short time, became marvelously simple and beautiful, immediate present and satisfactory. And it seemed real, too, as if I had moved out of awful dreams into a plain pure reality. . . . I felt dazed and warm and not exactly happy, but with the conception of happiness, usually absent from me, present somehow as a distant buzz (158)

and when he trips out, courtesy of Christopher's drugged cake. The trip begins with his focusing on the blue-black despair of the teapot and realizing how beautiful it is, and ends with his conjugating *amo*, *amas*, *amat* with his only fond childhood memory aside from Crystal, Mr. Osmand (298). Of course, both of these happy, loving experiences (making love to Tommy and tripping out) have disastrous, destructive ends. In daylight, Hilary finds it difficult to accept the revelations of the trip. "At that moment I recalled what the equation had been which had

seemed to me last night to be so important, the secret of the universe. Forgiving equals being forgiven. Now in sober daylight it seemed just a piece of verbal nonsense" (306–07). Wittgenstein states, "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense"¹²; Hilary is on his way to learning this lesson.

Hilary's resistance to change and insistence on hanging on to some kind of order have to do with getting close to people. Leonard Bast shares with Hilary a fear of relationships, particularly among differing social classes, yet he attempts (unsuccessfully) to change his position, to establish an order to cling to and to improve his lot. Hilary and Crystal are in a dreadful situation, but because of Hilary's fear that such an episode could be repeated, he decides to pay a debt to fate by remaining in the situation and not reaching out to others. The irony, of course, is that an almost identical episode is repeated, even though he has wasted two decades of his and Crystal's lives to prevent it. Fate seeks him out. This phenomenon also occurs with him on a smaller scale: "The flat was strangely quiet and it had taken me a little while to realize that Christopher had already departed. I looked into his room. All his silly touching gear had disappeared. He had gone. I felt sad and a little frightened. An era was ending" (331). Hilary does not realize his feelings toward Christopher until he is gone. He wants at the same time to escape and to cling to his past ("I was rather short of future at present . . . 'Brace up, Crystal. All these things did happen. Keeping them secret isn't going to unhappen them'" [134–35]; "I had never felt more a victim of the past" [243]). Mortified by the idea of change, he cannot adapt as the Schlegels do. When Kitty asks, "Why should you be unhappy? As things are you're losing both ways, you're being miserable and you're solving nothing, you're doing nothing about it. Don't you want to change your life?" he replies, "I'm not sure. It could change for the worse" (196). In the end, it changes, whether for the better or for the worse, without his doing anything. Worst of all for him (and Clifford) is Crystal's revelation about Gunnar. "'You've changed the past,' I said" (253). For him, this is tantamount to changing the present or the future.

Hilary's mourning for Clifford, his realization that one does not appreciate relationships until they are removed, and his inability to continue to function on a level of "days" indicate his progress toward appreciating connections. Both *A Word Child* and *Howards End* are concerned with the philosophical issues like the moral problem of how to live and curiosity about what causes the things that happen to people, and both of them take a philosophical tack on the question. Their

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differences of method turn out to be similar ways of getting at the same message; the point is hope and love. Hilary, fragmented as he is (and tries to be), in the end begins to recognize the value of communication, for it is through communication with others that hope and love are transmitted. Rorty claims that Murdoch (in *Sovereignty of Good*)

wants to get behind Kantian notions of will, behind the Kantian formulation of an antithesis between determinism and responsibility, behind the Kantian distinction between the moral self and the empirical self. She wants to recapture the vocabulary of moral reflection . . . in which "perfection" is a central element, in which assignment of moral responsibility is a rather incidental element, and in which the discovery of a self (one's own or another's) is the endless task of love.¹³

This view definitely comes through in *A Word Child*, but Hilary is not quite as enlightened on it as his sister.

"It can never be perfect [Hilary says]. He can never forgive me."

"That's not the point," said Crystal. "What you must do is forgive him. That's what will make it perfect." (306)

By the last few pages of the book, Hilary understands the point about randomness and responsibility: "I felt a kind of crazy relief combined with a renewed agony at the accidentalness of it all" (391). No one is responsible, and no one can escape fate. After Wittgenstein, it does not make sense, after all. Articulating it seems to be the point. Hilary remarks, with his usual sardonic tone, "The Christ child, at any rate, had managed to get himself born," but he is aware of the hope inherent in that phrase. That other churches take up the chime and that he reinstates Tommy's fragmented name ("Tommy . . . Thomas . . . Thomasina") indicate that he is beginning to understand the value of communication and beginning to connect. Like the Schlegels, Hilary has begun to realize the value of hope and love; in the final analysis, Murdoch's *A Word Child* approximates Forster's "Only connect. . . ."

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Bellamy 131.

² "Against" 16.

³ "Against" 15.

⁴ Cf. Rorty, *Consequences* 17, 137; *Contingency* xvi.

⁵ *A Word Child* 27. Subsequent references to this work are noted by page number in the text.

⁶ Kane 12-13.

⁷ *Howards End* 68. Subsequent references to this work are noted by page number in the text.

⁸ For the complicated set of references to *Peter Pan* here and throughout Murdoch's work, see Dipple, 216–17, 223.

⁹ Todd 56–57.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein § 203. See also his discussion of language games §7; §§41, ff.; §§48, ff.

¹¹ Slaymaker 425.

¹² Wittgenstein §464.

¹³ Rorty, *Consequences* xxxiii.

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The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O'Connor: *Everything That Rises Must Converge*

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By her own avowal, Flannery O'Connor writes from a fixed perspective of Christian orthodoxy. "I write the way I do," she insists, "because (not though) I am a Catholic" and adds that all her stories "are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to accept it."¹

Her view that her stories are all of a piece clearly is not shared by many of her readers and critics, especially those outside her faith who have interpreted her works in ways that she would consider severe distortions of her materials and aims. For example, a variety of O'Connor's critics have expressed reservations ranging from doubt as to whether *any* religious intent is realized in her writings to the suspicion that her artistry is in fact not theological but demonic.²

If O'Connor's fiction fails to resonate sufficiently her spiritual theme, part of the reason may lie in her approach to writing. Discussing this approach, she emphasizes her greater attention to the technical demands of the stories than to other criteria affecting the formation and portrayal of her characters. Similarly, to the charge that, morally considered, her characters are typically too ambiguous to serve as either heroes or villains, she offers the defense of her affinity for Henry James's concept of felt life, holding that the writer's moral sense and

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dramatic sense must coincide (*HB* 124) and that in the best fiction the moral sense will thus emerge intact.

Related to this orientation, in its effect of moderating the religious theme in her works, is the very catholicity, the encompassing embrace, of her outlook. Her protagonists may not be able to support the grace that befalls them, but she loves them nonetheless. Compounding the problem is the fact that she loves the *antagonists* too and loves them just as much—understandably so, since these are modified into the protagonists of other works and thereby become the objects of the searching grace that finds them lacking. O'Connor confronts a drastically fallen world in which even the remnants of religious belief are vanishing and the instruments and recipients of grace themselves may be as sordid as the damned. She explains:

I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this *within* the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endurable; the only thing that makes the Church endurable is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in [my] stories. (*HB* 90)

To feel *ultimately* the contemporary world, though it is inexorably devolving to an unbearable state, as nonetheless the sole precinct and medium for the teleological realization of mankind's salvation through Christ's redemption is, perhaps inevitably, to possess a concomitant ethos riven with ambivalence—constraining love for the thing despised, cherishing of a world beyond endurance, a world of the spiritually blind, the degenerate, the odious. O'Connor's writings belie neither such an ethos nor her embracing of such a world, the world her fiction limns, one whose future inhabitants, she fears, "will know nothing of mystery or manners" (*HB* 92).

This paraphrase of the Henry James speculation on the young woman of the future charts the principal dimensions of her fiction, the nonreceptivity toward the mystery of grace by a society ever less mindful of manners (as codified *caritas*), ever less observant of the gestures and rites nourishing social interaction. At the level of realism O'Connor's fiction dramatizes the clashes among her defective

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characters in the domain of manners, baring their frailties—selfishness, bigotry, pride—and their dubiousness as vessels of grace. It is no wonder that the supernatural action of grace, since it is unrecognized by those it touches, is also too often scarcely detected by her readers, unless O'Connor employs some seemingly obtrusive authorial device to underscore it, thereby accenting the allegorical component of her work, but, more often than not, weakening its artistry. Both her novels are obviously "marred" by this alleged disjunction, as are several of the pieces in her first short-story collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,³ including the title story and, to some extent, what well may have been O'Connor's favorite of all her writings, "The Artificial Nigger."

In the last-written and most realistic of her books, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the disjunction is present but not so pronounced, the supernatural impress not so stark, as in the earlier works. The general domestication of the supernal, its attenuation to an appropriate blend with the "manners" component signaling social decay, is indeed one measure of the greater realism of this posthumous collection. And the central locus for this interplay of mystery and manners, the arena wherein the social skirmishes erupt and find resolution, is unremittingly the *domestic* one: the home, the family.

We may say, parenthetically and with due qualification, that the cohesive and nurturing tendency suggested by the centrality of the domestic theme in her stories is one clear index of the feminine consciousness in O'Connor's canon. Another is her deference to females as protagonists, and if not protagonists, at least stabilizers of the domestic realm, keepers of the house. Feministically viewed, an arguable axiom of O'Connor's works is that a male can appear as protagonist or focal character only if he (1) is not the functional (though perhaps titular) family leader or head of household and (2) if head, has no wife alive or physically present.

With a woman, then, established principally as monarch of the domicile (a woman typically bereft, betrayed, despised), the domestic theme in O'Connor's last original collection may be examined, with attention to its sundry functions as medium and catalyst for her characteristic concerns.

The title story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," is in its consuming secularity the most uniformly realistic of the volume, and as such provides a useful paradigm. Initially there is the conspicuous paradox of *rising descent*, the rising and convergence of a suppressed group (blacks) in society, while at the same time the society itself is

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devolving toward *the terrible world we are coming to*—a spiritual decay signified metaphorically by the themes of physical sordidness, displacement, hostility. This complex of degeneration marks a world “too much with us” today, presaging the irresonant, faithless world of tomorrow. The domestic arena becomes in effect a synecdoche of this transfiguration while providing a resistance to it, a tension affording possibilities for desirable modes of human interaction.

Julian's mother (note how O'Connor's women are typically designated by their *familial* roles—Mrs. May, his mother, Parker's *wife*, etc.), displaced from the elegant world of her childhood, suffers for attempting to practice her class-conscious mannerisms in a world that is “in a mess everywhere,” where social convergence has blurred class distinctions, where “the bottom rail is on the top.” Her displacement is heightened by her present status of living with her son Julian in a modest apartment in a neighborhood once fashionable but now deteriorated and dingy, as contrasted with her sense of her real home, the haven of her childhood, her grandfather's “mansion,” toward which she reverts in the confusion of her fatal stroke at the story's end.

It has been said that for O'Connor home is always heaven. This is no doubt true in the light of her ultimate view of present society, but this story conveys no palpable awareness of the celestial home (as does, say, the later “Judgement Day”). Here it is only the lost mansion, not heaven, that the mother appears in the end to seek, her heritage—sold, ruined, possessed by Negroes. Significantly, Julian has an obsessive attachment to the house, regularly dreaming about it, assuring himself that only he, not his mother, could have appreciated it, and finally thinking “bitterly of the house that had been lost for him” (13).

Lost for him: the symbolic import of the house is enlarged. Of the mother's many sacrifices for Julian, which he rationalizes as demanded in compensation for her ineptness, that of the ancestral home is primal and encompassing. One surmises that the house was lost for Julian's *sake*, that whatever legacy there was to his mother from its sale went to augment the funds scraped together by her in the struggle to better her son's welfare, as her own was largely neglected (“her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened”). In any case, at another level the house was Julian's link to his mother's world and world view, her manners and values; though decayed when he saw it as a child, “it remained in his mind as his mother had known it.”

Clearly her vision determines and controls his own, here as in other respects, despite his professing that he is “not dominated by his mother.” His very being, in fact, seems little more than a reaction to his

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perception of hers. "Everything that gave her pleasure," we are led to believe, "was small and depressed him," and

in spite of her, he had turned out so well. In spite of going to a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts. Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. (35-36)

A judicious reading of the story would mitigate these assumptions of Julian's. Consider, for instance, the "miraculous" one that he has severed himself emotionally from his mother and does not return the "blinding" love she has for him. O'Connor is not frivolous in her use of the word *love*; it occurs with startling infrequency in her stories. She asserts,

I don't think . . . that to be a true Christian you believe that mutual interdependence is a conceit. This is far from Catholic doctrine; in fact it strikes me as highly Protestant, a sort of justification by faith. God became not only a man, but Man. This is the mystery of Redemption and our salvation is worked out on earth according as we love one another, see Christ in one another, etc., by works. This is one reason I am chary of using the word, love, loosely. I prefer to use it in its practical forms, such as prayer, almsgiving, visiting the sick and burying the dead and so forth. (HB 102)

Within the family paradigm, the practical acts that issue from parental bonding, acts of caretaking, sacrificial acts, may be added to O'Connor's list, since those performing such acts (usually mothers who receive no gratitude from the children on whom their parental duties are discharged) are among the characters treated most sympathetically in her scheme of extenuation. Here Julian is correct in concluding that his mother loves him but excessive in contending that she is blinded by such love; and his cultivated ability to see her with complete objectivity looms as one of his severest frailties.

In the end what blinds her to him, beyond any recognition, is his rejection of her (evinced through various gestures, notably his viewing her as a *stranger* and contemplating abandoning her when they reach their bus stop, and culminating symbolically in his rationalized complicity with the contemporary forces that erupt in the black woman's assault on her). Ultimately this rejection is recognized for the evil that it was, and Julian tries to (re)establish genuine familial ties,

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discarding his conception of her as a child ironically after she has reverted psychically to her childhood, as he cries, "Mamma, Mamma." But it is too late. He has succeeded utterly in his sundering denial, succeeded in making them strangers to each other. Looking gropingly at him in the end, she finds "nothing familiar" about him, finds "nothing." She has returned to *her* world, the matrix of her identity, a world that antedates and excludes him.

Earlier Julian ridicules her contention that "he hadn't even entered the real world." It is true; if her sense of herself is unsuited to the modern temper, his premature world-weariness and arrogant misanthropy insulate him from any genuine relationship, even with his mother. It is his rejection of her, his figurative killing of her, that projects the "real world" that he must enter after her death—"the world of guilt and sorrow."

"Greenleaf" presents another struggling mother with ungrateful offspring, another who is beleaguered and victimized by the changing times. The external antagonists are again placed on the domestic stage, and again the home (homestead) is in danger of being lost. Mrs. May, through industry and perseverance, has succeeded in turning the run-down country property left her by her husband into a viable dairy farm, where she is able to rear and educate her two sons. The Greenleafs, the family of the hired tenant, epitomize for her the inferior order that threatens to supplant the "decent" class of people she represents. Like Julian's mother, she is assured of her social status and character—knows "who she is"—and like Julian, her bachelor sons are peculiarly dependent on her, while mocking her in their cavalier acceptance of, and complicity in, the social change that menaces her. The older, Scofield, takes pride in being "the best nigger-insurance salesman in the county" and taunts her with the professed intent of marrying, after her death, some farm girl to take over the place, someone like Mrs. Greenleaf.

For Mrs. May, Mrs. Greenleaf epitomizes the very dregs of the unsavory Greenleaf clan, a woman who neglects her duties toward her children (e.g., by failing to keep them clean), no mother at all, who directs her attention and energies into a particularly disgusting form of "prayer healing" involving praying and moaning while sprawling on the ground. Of course, for O'Connor Mrs. Greenleaf is a grotesque near-saint, engaged in one of those practical acts—prayer—that manifest Christian love. The prospect of having the place taken over by

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the likes of *her* repulses Mrs. May, affording an avenue for her son's fiendishly sadistic torment of her.

It is through the Greenleafs that the central themes of the story are realized. In the case of O'Connor's supernatural emphasis, Mrs. Greenleaf and the bull (freighted with symbolism) that finally kills Mrs. May are the principal agents. With respect to the ubiquitous theme of class displacement, the spotlight shifts to the Greenleaf sons, with their foreign wives and progeny. As usual, however, these larger concerns are viewed through the domestic lens, through their impact on the home and family.

The shiftless Greenleafs have managed to produce two sons who, through (in Mrs. May's estimation) their fool's luck, their cunning application of whatever mother wit they possessed, and the largess of the federal government, have begun to rise in the world. Now situated nearby in their own dairy business, with equipment more modern than hers, they seem poised, in their "international" families, for social climbing and likely to become eventually what she calls "Society." In essence, they will be the inheritors. They have been variously successful where her own sons have failed, a fact kept before her by Mr. Greenleaf's harping upon the superior virtues of *his* sons, especially those involving family obligations: "If hit was my boys they would never have allowed their maw to go out after hired help in the middle of the night. They would have did it theirself." Unlike her sons, who are drastically different and forever squabbling, the Greenleaf twins are practically indistinguishable in name, appearance, family constituency, domicile, and disposition. Further, it is *their* bull that threatens to ruin her herd, which represents her sons' future, while the sons seem not at all to care what happens on or to the place. Her conviction that they will marry "trash" after her death and pass her bequest into the lineage of "scrub humans" leads her to entail the property, preventing their leaving it to their wives. The future and her legacy are reified in the homestead, which promises to be lost, ruined, as Julian's was.

The crushing domestic blow in O'Connor is familial rejection or denial. Her much-favored story "The Artificial Nigger" reaches its peak of intensity when Mr. Head denies his grandson Nelson, who is reaching out to him for protection in a moment of crisis, by saying to the child's persecutors, "I never seen him before." Perhaps it is because, in the theological tradition, the archetypal denial is yoked to the archetypal betrayal in the primal Christian family group of Christ and his disciples that the willful severing of kinship is so crucial for O'Connor. Clearly in the earlier story the episode of denial is

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heightened, as the estranged boy refuses thereafter to come near his grandfather; and it reaches resolution, resulting in communion, only through the symbolic influence of the Negro statue, a figure for divine grace and a type of crucifix.

In "Greenleaf" there is an arresting involuntary rejection by Mrs. May of her sons when she exclaims that the Greenleaf twins should have been her sons and that *her* boys should have "belonged to that woman!"—Mrs. Greenleaf. (Significantly, this outburst occurs only after one of them declares that he would not milk a cow even to save his mother's soul from hell.) Once uttered, Mrs. May's denial is so horrible to her that she is blinded by tears. Again, we see the larger, external theme of class conflict, of chauvinism, being subsumed by the more tangible, internal, and affective one of family loyalty.

The rejection of Mrs. May by her sons, especially by the younger Wesley, is cumulative, reiterative, and complete. Complete, at least, within the confines of the story, since in O'Connor's panorama there is no *earthly* closure. If her camera were to continue running after Mrs. May's death on the horn of the bull, for instance, we might see in the sons, as intimated in the case of Julian, an embracing of her as they wake to "the world of guilt and sorrow." But their rejection here progresses through the ghoulish anticipation of her death to Wesley's taunting contention that they are not really her sons. This rejection is heightened by an ensuing outburst between them that ends in a fight. The rebuff wounds Mrs. May, who wheezes "like an old horse lashed unexpectedly" and runs from the room. Marking the ultimacy of the rejection is the fact that this is the last time the boys appear in the story, the last time they are together. Again the domestic dynamics inform and adumbrate O'Connor's social and religious themes.

"A View of the Woods" at its core presents an internecine clash of family loyalties configuring O'Connor's larger socio-theistic concerns. Thematically, the ecological interests implicit in the destruction of nature for the sake of "progress" merge with the spiritual ones involving the symbolic violation of the divine through the proposed sacrificing of the woods and the concomitant destruction of family unity. Tilman, the up-and-coming businessman to whom the lot fronting the woods is sold, is presented as a palpably Luciferian character who is even a little *ahead* of progress, a representative of The Future. The woods, as described and employed, and as O'Connor herself confirms, are associated with Christ. Old man Fortune allies himself with the new class, with destructive secularism, when he

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champions Tilman and what he stands for. Tilman's anticipated business enterprises will bring the world's conveniences and travelers of all types from across the nation to the family's door. The sale of the lot in front of their house for the construction of Tilman's gas station will initiate this new era. The sale, in Fortune's estimation, will be a supremely beneficent act, redolent of the highest ideals of patriotism, democracy, egalitarianism:

If his daughter thought she was better than Tilman, it would be well to take her down a little. All men were created free and equal. When this phrase sounded in his head, his patriotic sense triumphed and he realized that it was his duty to sell the lot, that he must insure the future. He looked out the window at the moon shining over the woods across the road and listened for a while to the hum of the crickets and treefrogs, and beneath their racket, he could hear the throb of the future town of Fortune. (79-80)

Of course Mary Fortune Pitts, his granddaughter, knows nothing of these larger significances; *her* responses are domestic, familial: a gas station there would obliterate her family's view of the woods and would replace the "lawn" where her daddy, Pitts, grazes his calves. Daughter of Fortune's daughter who married the despised Pitts, the child becomes a hostage in the battle of wills between Fortune and the Pitts nuclear family. That she is like Fortune—his namesake and a replica in appearance and disposition—makes her his, the only Pitts he has any use for, the designated beneficiary of his total estate. At the same time, her parents suspect that since she is favored by her grandfather (because of her resemblance to him), she is the source of his hostility to *them*. So just as he punishes them through his partiality to her at their expense, they retaliate against him by chastising her for assumed complicity with the old man, for serving as a wedge against her own immediate family. Most remarkably, she is accused of putting him up to selling the lot to Tilman, for which suspected act she is beaten by Pitts.

The periodic beatings given Mary Fortune by Pitts remain rather mysterious and problematical throughout the story. Only within the domestic context, with respect to the issue of family integrity, do they become sufficiently meaningful. At first there is some question of whether they actually occur or are merely imagined by Fortune. When it becomes obvious that they are real, they may be assessed as a kind of bugaboo of Fortune's, enraging him by reason of the girl's acceptance of them, her displaying even "something very like cooperation." What remains baffling is that the child continues to fiercely deny them,

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proclaiming "Nobody's ever beat me in my life and if anybody did, I'd kill him."

A plausible explanation is that for O'Connor the beatings have a far larger symbolic than literal import, that they are received by the child not as punishment for particular wrongdoing (since from all indication she has done no particular wrong) but as acts of familial bonding, acknowledgment by her father and family that she is indeed one of theirs—a Pitts. They become expressions of acceptance denoting a parental prerogative that Fortune cannot proscribe and that, to his dismay, the child embraces.

It follows then that when Fortune attempts to usurp Pitts's authority and beat her himself for the first time (becoming the *nobody* who has ever beaten her, the *anybody* who ever might beat her), the beating becomes a literal one; and she makes good her pledge by, effectively, killing him.

The most conclusive blow in this homicide is not physical but, psychological, and again domestic. Once more it is the ultimate terrestrial rejection: the denial of kin. After the girl pounds the old man to the ground in their mortal combat at the end of the story, she looks down into his eyes and says, "You been whipped by me, and I'm PURE Pitts." There are layers of implications here. Fortune, looking up into her eyes, sees his own image as she announces his vanquishment by pure Pitts. Apart from the evident symbolism of the Pitts clan's finally defeating and supplanting him is the less distinct form betokening his ultimate *self*-defeat. The pride resulting in his rejection of his daughter's family, except for the member he appropriates as his own, is incarnated in Mary Fortune; so that pride is the cause of his final overthrow, at the same time that he is inadvertently extinguishing it, as he slays the granddaughter who has spiritually betrayed and abandoned him in identifying with her father, the detested Pitts.

Fortune, of course, has rejected *her* earlier, in another instance of heightened familial denial. Significantly, it occurs when he belittles her for accepting the beatings from her father:

"Are you a Fortune," he said, "or are you a Pitts? Make up your mind."

Her voice was loud and positive and belligerent. "I'm Mary—Fortune—Pitts," she said.

"Well I," he shouted, "am PURE Fortune!"

There was nothing she could say to this and she showed it. For an instant she looked completely defeated, and the old man saw with a disturbing clearness that this was the Pitts look. What

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he saw was the Pitts look, pure and simple, and he felt personally strained by it, as if it had been found on his own face. (82)

The impact of this rejection on the child is telling, and the defeat she suffers associates her thereafter with her father and against Fortune. From this point on in the story, she is deeply morose, glumly unresponsive to all Fortune's efforts to revive their previously communicative banter; "for all the answer he got," "he might have been chauffeuring a small dead body," we are told at one point. She will indeed soon be a small dead body, but already she is dead to him.

Not ignored by O'Connor in her complex of domestic concerns is the dutiful homemaker, Mrs. Pitts, who discharges what she deems her familial obligations to her father in taking care of Fortune in his old age. If her motivation is to be accepted as genuine, against Fortune's conviction of her ulterior motives, she is performing a sacrificial act, being regarded by her father as no more than a tenant while she, apparently against her family's persuasions and with no expectation of reward, stays to care for him. Fortune virtually rejects her when she marries Pitts, concluding that in so doing she has shown that she "preferred Pitts to home"; and a true home is what he has denied her ever since.

"The Enduring Chill" is the first story in the volume that does not end with an actual or imminent death, though Asbury's conviction of his impending demise suffuses the work. Asbury, the intellectual and would-be artist, has renounced his provincial home and family, seeing his mother as the culprit in the utter failure of his life; but, of necessity, it is to *home* that he returns to die.

Though Asbury is the story's protagonist, the one to be touched by O'Connor's "action of grace," as manifested in the conspicuous descent of the symbolized Holy Ghost upon him at the end, it is his mother who is the domestic focus. He blames her for his expected death; she dismisses the notion that she would *allow* him to die under her parental care, and it is through her efforts—deflecting his verbal attacks and stripping away his illusions at every turn—that his life is dispensed to him and he may begin to become a New Man. Mrs. Fox contends to him that he has a home, something his admired Northern associates would wish they had, and forces upon him the services of the local physician he despises, who, she is aware, will take a personal interest in him. The priest she secures for him expects that he will pray—with his family—and, if they do not pray, will pray *for* them. The mother's black dairy workers, with whom Asbury tries to establish an egalitarian

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rapport, wonder why he disparages his mother and speculate that the reason is her failure to "whup" him enough when he was little. His efforts to have "communion" with them by inducing them to drink with him unpasteurized milk—against his mother's rules, in defiance of the social and racial taboo, but in this instance also a medical taboo—results in his true disease. He drinks the milk (though the workers do not) and contracts undulant fever, which the country doctor, Block, eventually diagnoses, concluding that Asbury must have drunk some unpasteurized milk "up there."

Essentially it is Asbury's assumed realization that his woes have, in the main, resulted not from his mother's values, the values of home, but from his rejection of them that signals the final peeling away of his illusions. His spiritual deficiencies, exposed by the priest, may be most immediately tied to the religious climax at the end, but the realization of his *domestic* failures undergirds it.

"The Comforts of Home," as the title suggests, is anchored in the domestic, and in domestic disruption, since the loss of such comforts eventuates for the story's reflector, Thomas. While treating moral concerns, this work is less recognizably religious than "The Enduring Chill." O'Connor's dogma is well insulated by her domestic drama.

What is accentuated in the dramatization is the social theme. Sarah Ham, the "little slut" that Thomas's mother all but adopts and that she obtrudes upon their domain, brings with her the taint of ineffective, perhaps misdirected, institutionalized social services. The mother avers that what she truly needs is a home, though in providing her one she is displacing and alienating her son. A dissembling nymphomaniac who calls herself Star Drake, even Sarah dismisses the woman's do-goodism by labeling her "about seventy-five years behind the times," providing another instance of the ingratitude that frequently greets altruistic efforts in O'Connor's works.

The story illustrates some of the difficulties encountered in O'Connor that inevitably lead to interpretations she would find objectionable. In this regard it is instructive to view it alongside the next story in the collection, "The Lame Shall Enter First." Here too, out of the impurely good intentions of the homeowner, a disruptive force is brought into the home. Sheppard, seeing the potential in the clubfooted Rufus, attempts to rescue the boy from the stultifying and corruptive effects of his sordid background and the ineptness of related welfarism and to "reform" the boy himself by providing him a real home, even

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telling himself also that Rufus's presence will have a salutary, charity-building influence on Norton, Sheppard's young son.

Other parallels abound. Like Sarah Ham, Rufus feels no gratitude for the efforts directed toward his betterment and continues to pursue his usual antisocial, even criminal behavior while in the home of his benefactor, in some sense treacherously desecrating its sanctity. Neither has had a genuine home before, but each seems remarkably indifferent to the one generously provided. Thomas informs his mother that Sarah is "nothing but a slut. She makes fun of you behind your back. She means to get everything she can out of you and you are nothing to her" (119). His mother concedes as much, saying, "I know I'm nothing but an old bag of wind to her." Likewise, when Norton tries to protest to his father about Rufus's breach of domestic ethics—sullyng the sanctum of his dead mother's room and her personal effects, dancing, in her corset, with the black cook—Sheppard condemns him for tattling and will brook no denigration of Rufus, who mocks his reform attempts and disparages him for thinking himself Jesus Christ. The "congenital liar" Sarah, having been analyzed and instructed by psychiatrists, "knows" that she is incorrigible, that there is "no hope for her." Rufus flaunts *his* resistance to (Sheppard's) do-goodism, bragging that he persists in committing crimes because he's good at it and that he is in the power of Satan. The similarities go on and on.

A crucial difference is in intended impact; one gathers that O'Connor sanctions the charitable efforts of Julian's mother. She has written that in "The Comforts of Home" "nobody is redeemed" but she explains that

the old lady is the character whose position is right and the one who is right is usually the victim. If there is any question of a symbolic redemption, it would be through the old lady who brings Thomas face to face with his own evil—which is that of putting his own comfort before charity (however foolish). His doing that destroys the one person his comfort depended on, his mother. (HB 434)

Her opinion of Sheppard's efforts, however, is clarified when she labels him "a man who thought he was good and thought he was doing good when he wasn't" (HB 490).

It may be asked to what extent these contrasting assessments are supported by O'Connor's fictional treatment and realized through her dramatization. Her tenet that the one who is right is usually the victim may be illuminating, but questions are raised concerning her definition of victimization. Does the victim have to die, for example, as Thomas's

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mother does and O'Connor's characters so often do? If a necessary determinant, is death a *sufficient* determinant of victimization? A case can be made in Thomas's behalf, defending him against the charge of "evil" that O'Connor makes. His analysis of his mother's behavior seems sound enough:

There was an observable tendency in all her actions. This was, with the best of intentions in the world, to make a mockery of virtue, to pursue it with such mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous. . . . Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified. . . . His own life was made bearable by the fruits of his mother's saner virtues—by the well-regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served. But when virtue got out of hand with her, as now, a sense of devils grew upon him. (114)

Likewise, Walter Sullivan sees the mother's generosity as representing a "kind of sentimental, self-serving charity" resulting "from a misunderstanding of ultimate truth" (10). Furthermore, Thomas's perception of Sarah's incorrigibility, her being beyond their help and better off in an institution, appears plausible.

The key to his culpability in O'Connor's scheme seems to lie in her rather deterministic revelation that Thomas "had inherited his father's reason without his ruthlessness and his mother's love of good without her tendency to pursue it." In other words, his problem is his very makeup as a family constituent. But in the context of the story this is far from obvious as a problem of culpability. Sarah is such an utterly repulsive character that his stance toward her has merit, and he does wonder, at least, what the attitude of God was to the "moral moron" Sarah—"meaning if possible to adopt it." Moreover, the voice of his dead father impugning the mother's impulsive violation of their home seems a defensible complement to Thomas's own outrage. Additionally, Thomas's mother virtually rejects him, ostensibly a grievous offense in O'Connor's moral scheme. He gives his mother an ultimatum—she must choose between him and Sarah, and she obviously chooses "the little slut" by bringing her back to the house. And on another occasion she allows the girl to stay there longer than just the one night she assures him of; so her credibility as a character is further reduced vis-à-vis his.

The voice of the dead father warrants further consideration. It is one of several components suggesting a mildly feminist strain in the story, wherein the inferior status of female characters is tacitly criticized

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through the mere highlighting of selected features illustrating their secondary condition. The man, we learn, was ruthless and a hypocrite, a dissembler who, in making the country men regard him as one of them, had "lived his lie" without ever having to tell one. Clearly, while alive he had been at odds with his wife over her "mindless charity" but apparently knew how to "handle her," how to "put his foot down." Thomas lacks his father's attributes in this respect, and to the old man this indicates that Thomas's masculinity is questionable. He belittles Thomas for letting a woman dominate him, proclaiming that she had never driven *him* from his own table. "Show her who's boss," his voice goads Thomas; "[you] let her run over you. You ain't like me. Not enough to be a man" (120).

Extending this strain is Farebrother, the sheriff that Thomas finally goes to see for help, who has known the father and who apparently shares his temperament and tendencies. Farebrother reminds Thomas that the old man would never truckle to a woman and, after agreeing to come to the house and investigate Sarah's taking of the gun, orders him to "keep out of my way—yourself and them two women too."

There are hints of the feminist concern in other stories, e.g., "Greenleaf," where the Greenleaf females seem to be slighted in deference to the male children and to diminish in importance as the action progresses, and where Mrs. May laments that she is the victim, has always been because she is a woman. In "The Comforts of Home," though, as has been suggested, the voice of the dead father may well be taken not merely as a continuation of the battle of wills between the man and his widow but as the force sent to correct the disgraced status of the house resulting from her disruption of its domestic harmony through her "mindless" charity.

The word "mindless" is pertinent, since it fits into the mind-heart dichotomy so prominent in O'Connor's works. (The argument in the title story over the seat of genuine culture—the mind versus the heart—exemplifies the pattern of hyperrational, unfeeling characters scattered through her fiction.) Here the dichotomy operates most intensely within Thomas himself. Arguably, he may possess the better, or at least less extreme, qualities of both his respective parents—his father's reason, his mother's love of good—without their "worse" ones—ruthlessness and the (excessive) tendency to pursue good. But it is the ruthlessness of the dead father that invades Thomas in the end, signified by the gun (inherited from the old man) and her dead husband's voice that the mother hears issuing from the lips of her son

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before the trigger is pulled to end her life. The old man evidently triumphs.

Perhaps the strongest feature of the mother's altruism, making it a thing of the heart and therefore blessed for O'Connor, is again domestically based; it is seeing others as her own children. The protagonist of the title story in O'Connor's first volume evinces the action of grace when she recognizes the Misfit as one of her children before he kills her. Thomas's mother demonstrates the radical Christian virtue of loving thy neighbor as thyself, of holding even strangers in no less esteem than one's own kin. This is driven home to us by the reiterated explanation for her avid concern with Sarah's welfare: "I keep thinking it might be you," she repeatedly tells her son. The familial dimension of "The Comforts of Home" is vital. In no other of O'Connor's stories is it more deeply based or more multifunctional.

The altruism of Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" is of a different order. His attitude toward his son Norton falls somewhere between condescension and contempt. Hence his benevolence concerning Rufus is hollow—vain, mind-driven, absent of heart. His actions are dictated by self-regard, cold theory, social scientism, as opposed to sincere personal engagement. Rufus succinctly sizes up Sheppard by remarking that he may be good but he "ain't right."

Symbolically, because of the emptiness of his motivation, Sheppard is unable to create the family he attempts by positioning Rufus as a prospective brother to (actually a replacement of) his real son, and (the father rationalizes) deflecting Norton's obsessive attachment to his dead mother.

Sheppard stresses the "selfishness" in the child's fixation, but at least the attachment is concrete—to a real person whose death Norton cannot comprehend or accept, which cannot be mitigated (but rather is enhanced) by Sheppard's materialistic denial of a hereafter. And Norton's devotion is necessarily filial, born of a relationship with an integral member of the family and home he has known. Ironically, just as Rufus supplants Norton as Sheppard's son, he also replaces Sheppard as Norton's parent.⁴ The latter act is prepared for by Sheppard's rejection of Norton—as usual in highly intensified scenes. After desecrating the dead mother's room, Rufus is given her bed to sleep in; Norton becomes so incensed that his father whips him. Then the utter denial occurs when Sheppard refuses to entertain the thought that Rufus, despite the certainty of the police concerning his guilt, could have left the movie he attended with Norton and broken into a house, as alleged. The captivation is so complete that he misconstrues the

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words expressing Rufus's enthrallment of him as *thanks* and responds by calling Rufus "son." Immediately thereafter, as he sees Norton beckoning him from across the hall, he decides he cannot go to him without violating Rufus's presumed trust. Norton, of course, would have told him that Rufus *did* leave the theater to commit the break-in, but Sheppard willfully ignores the child's call. He denies his son. We are told that, in response, the child "sat for some time looking at the spot where his father had stood. Finally his gaze became aimless and he lay back down" (153).

After this, we may conclude, the forsaken Norton's central objective is to establish contact with his *one* parent—who resides, according to Rufus, in the sky. Rufus plants the seed of suicide in the child's consciousness through teaching him the Bible, and finally triumphs over Sheppard in their struggle for the boy's soul when Norton hangs himself to join his mother in heaven.

The story shows that rationalized "good works" fail and that human (i.e., familial) sentiment is genuine, *right*, as the ground of altruism. But O'Connor becomes uncharacteristically didactic at the end and restates what has been portrayed, that Sheppard had tried to stuff "his own emptiness with good works" and "had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (164). He at long last feels a rush of love for Norton, vows never to let him suffer again; but the child is gone. With this culmination the religious and domestic themes converge, and, as the story's action illustrates, the domestic configuration is once again a sounding board for the spiritual voice.

In "Revelation" the domestic theme is rendered essentially in interfamilial terms. O'Connor again brings to the fore class-consciousness and apprehension regarding the changing times, the new age, connecting the two with her religious component and giving them all about equal emphasis. The most comic of these stories, "Revelation" presents the unlikely phenomenon in O'Connor of a female protagonist with a living spouse, a more than incidental feature.

Through Mrs. Turpin's consciousness the gallery of characters is introduced in the doctor's waiting room; the descriptive details individualize each, yet place them all neatly in her pattern of class stratification, as outlined in her pastime of "naming the classes of people":

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people . . . then next to them . . . were the white trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land-owners, to

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which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. . . . Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven. (170)

Those in the waiting room are delineated by their words, dress, and demeanor, but it is important to note that *domestic* connections form the axis on which the class distinctions revolve and are a principle of character evaluation. Being "white-trashy," for instance, does not inhere simply in lack of possessions or education; it is revealed in the failure to keep one's child clean or teach it proper behavior. Also, the familial focus can serve as a means of *disjunction*. Mary Grace, the ugly girl whose pivotal act of assaulting Mrs. Turpin forms the story's climax, is viewed as an ungrateful family aberration, almost incomprehensible to her mother. A friendly and "stylish" lady, the mother criticizes the girl's thanklessness and failure to appreciate her advantages, i.e., her supportive, loving, sacrificing family and all it has provided for her. In this way the familial theme is dispersed in the story, serving as a generalized elastic device of coherence and emphasis. It is the abstract concept of family that serves functionally as a kind of meta-setting, as opposed to the conventional O'Connor application of the literal and immediate family.

But the immediate familial relationship is not completely neglected. Just before Mary Grace attacks her, Mrs. Turpin is rhapsodically expressing gratitude for her blessings:

"If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different!" For one thing, somebody else would have got Claud. At the thought of this, she was flooded with gratitude and a terrible pang of joy ran through her. "Oh thank you Jesus, Jesus, thank you!" she cried aloud. (177)

It is worthy of note that the possibility of someone else's getting her husband Claud is not part of what she says, but something she thinks,

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realizes—and the realization of her husband as a gift fills her with joy and impels her to shout her thanks; which in turn causes the ugly Mary Grace to hurl the book at her face. Aside from whatever O'Connor's intent may be in having the assault occur on this note, the fact remains that what is set in pointed relief here is the primary domestic relationship—husband and wife.

At this point, with the girl's attack, the dispersed domesticism of the waiting room ends, and the reader is prepared for the Turpins' return to their actual domicile and family context. Emphasis here appears in the fact that Mrs. Turpin cherishes the reality that their home is still there ("she would not have been startled to see a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys"). More appears in the rather peculiar exchange between the spouses later, in bed, when instead of discussing the girl's indictment of her (an "old wart hog" from hell), Mrs. Turpin solicitously asks her husband how his injured leg feels, and later, when he is about to leave to take their workers home, impulsively says, "Kiss me." And, finally, before she has her revelation—of all the classes of people ultimately marching into heaven—there is a signal occurrence. She has just vocally confronted Christ, charging that even if he decrees that the class divisions be erased and the "bottom rail" put on top, there will still be a class system, a hierarchy, "a top and a bottom." Then she sees in the distance Claud's departing truck and realizes that "at any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road" (185). She remains fixed and anxious until she sees Claud's truck returning, sees it turn into their own road, to safety; only then does the spiritual revelation occur to her. In short, "Revelation" stresses social class-consciousness, minimizes *starkly* moral concerns, and follows the expected pattern of rendering the spiritual message in a domestic context.

"Parker's Back" is the least verisimilar, the most biblically allegorical, of all the stories in the collection. It has the least coherence and substance in the mimetic sense, and its characters are seemingly the most manipulated by O'Connor's religious thrust. The religious theme is paramount, even to the extent that it distorts and vitiates the realistic tenor of O'Connor's presentation. Despite all this, however, the domestic theme is discernible in several respects relating to significant events in the title character's life: (1) Parker's *mother* took him to revival, though he ran away and joined the navy; (2) his mother is responsible—paid—for the notable tattoo of his, but insisted that it include her name; (3) against his will Parker gets married, but marriage

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makes him gloomier than ever; (4) he feels the need for a tattoo on his back, but wants only one his wife would like; (5) he is surprised to be capable of staying with a woman who is pregnant; (6) he is driven to get a strange tattoo on his back (he says) *because* he married a woman who is pregnant; (7) it seems that all along his real desire was to please her (his wife); and so on.

Further, though relatively muted, a pattern of O'Connor's larger domestic concerns is detectable. For example, one senses the theme of displacement when Parker is in the city getting his transforming tattoo. He feels isolated and longs to be home with his wife, Sarah Ruth. And of course there is the theme of rejection—by Parker's cohorts, his "society," when he is thrown out of the pool hall,⁵ and by his wife. He has in a sense betrayed her through dissimulation regarding his female employer's attitude toward him and the like. Sarah Ruth rejects him, at least the secular him that has attempted to deceive her, by not responding at last to his preferred name but only to the Testamentary one—Obadiah Elihue.⁶

In this story the domestic theme resonates in other subtle ways. When Parker comes home with his ultimate tattoo and his wife will not admit him until he submits to identifying himself with the name he despises, she has symbolically *named* him. After chastening him for his deception, aware now of the truth of his status with the female employer, she whips him with a broom. At one level of implication, she has become his mother, dominating him as she might a child. Here earlier strains assume related significance—the fact that she had to marry before having children, that he has been repulsed by her pregnancy, that he from all appearances has never known his own motivations, his identity. The story ends with him beaten, standing outside, "crying like a baby." Metaphorically, he *is* a baby, i.e., "born again"—the symbolic fruition of her pregnancy; and whatever implication this episode may carry thematically, it is steeped in domesticity.

The closing story, "Judgement Day," fittingly recapitulates a number of themes sounded in the earlier selections. Not the least of these is that of domestic displacement. As in the title story, the family holdings have been lost, along with the social status they signified. Old Tanner, a former landowner who raised four children, "was somebody when he was somebody," his daughter contends, but now he is decrepit and dispossessed, feebly seeking his Georgia homeland to serve as his final resting place. He, like Julian's mother, is spiritually rebuffed by his

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offspring and suffers a stroke after being accosted by a Negro who takes offense at a racially insensitive act.

Again the racial encounters illustrate the social phenomenon of rising descent that O'Connor projects. The blacks, as they advance—demonstrating for some the government's inexorable effort to turn society “upsidedown,” to put “the bottom rail on top”—grow ever more assertive and testy, consequently engaging in confrontations with those Southern whites continuing to exhibit traditional racial mores. Sometimes, as in the cases of Julian's mother and Tanner, these confrontations prove deadly.

But the roles of the blacks in “Judgement Day” are just as vital to O'Connor's treatment of the story's domestic theme. Coleman, whom Tanner has mentally vanquished with the symbolic aid of the “spectacles” he absently fashions from bark and hay wire, becomes Tanner's domestic servant in their “home”—the shack they construct together as squatters on a plot of vacated land later purchased by a local Negro (only part black, also Indian and white), Doctor Foley. Tanner realizes, as does Foley, that his white skin, with “the government” against him, is no longer a badge of superiority; and Foley gives him the option of becoming *his* servant or being evicted.

Rather than accept such a humiliating role, Tanner goes to live with his daughter in her apartment in New York—which he finds a hellish new world, an impersonal “no-place,” inhabited by “all stripes of foreigner, all of them twisted in the tongue.” Desmond summarizes its racial and social dynamics:

The New York world of Tanner's daughter is one ostensibly marked by social progress, at least to the extent that a relative equality exists between whites and Negroes. But underlying this superficial advance is the deeper fact of spiritual alienation, signified by the estrangement from others that characterizes urban life there, the people of each race guardedly “minding their own business.” In short, it is a mock community, a perversion of the idea of mystical community, a society which has lost the long view of history because it has turned away from the spiritual roots of such a mystical vision. (78)

Here even Tanner's daughter is a stranger to him, one whose philosophy, too, is non-engagement (“Live and let live”), who shuts him out by conversing with herself, who ridicules his religious beliefs as “Baptist hooey,” and who intends to renege on her promise to have him buried at home, in Georgia. This familial betrayal is the unkindest cut of all, and Tanner concludes that he made a colossal mistake in coming

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to live with her, that Coleman and he constituted a more genuine family, and that now he would gladly be Foley's lackey, his "white nigger," if it meant he could live again in the departed shack that used to be his home.

From this ungodly no-place, symptomatic of that terrible world we are coming to, Tanner must escape. His attempts to do so bring O'Connor's social and theistic themes into panoptic integration with their domestic vehicle. The black actor, whom Tanner has refused to except from his racially stereotypical views, tellingly asserts his difference by proclaiming that he is not any "coal man" before his violent disposal of Tanner as the story draws to a close. The irony in his apparently mistaking Tanner's confused tentative greeting—"Coleman?"—as merely a vocational label, instead of in effect a compounded racial typing, is pronounced. Even more so is the irony suffusing the fatal attack itself on Tanner, in response to the old man's plea for help to get home, an act of hostility that results in sending him not at once to the geographical home, which the old man immediately seeks, but to the otherworldly, eternal one for which he secretly longs.⁷ The homicidal act by "Preacher" becomes underhandedly a benevolent rite.

It remains only for the daughter to complete the domestic resolution of the work. She betrays her pledge to Tanner and buries his body there in New York City. But afterward, though herself a professed nonbeliever like the black Northern actor, she is unable to sleep well until she has her father raised and sent home as she had promised—after which her peace and good looks return. We may well see this corrective adjustment in the daughter's attitude as yet another instance of O'Connor's "action of grace." Nonetheless, its resulting gesture, the final and consummating act of the book, is firmly positioned on the clearly *domestic* fulcrum of filial obligation, familial duty.

NOTES

¹ *The Habit of Being* (hereafter cited as *HB*) 275.

² See Gentry, ch. 8.

³ Reprinted, along with the two novels, in *Three*.

⁴ Gentry validly sees Sheppard taking Rufus to replace the dead wife and cites as evidence Rufus's putting on her corset, being given her room, insinuating vague "immoral suggestions" on Sheppard's part, etc. (155–59).

⁵ For commentary on the virtual absence of society in O'Connor and its implications, see Kessler ch. II (esp. 71–73).

⁶ Useful remarks on the biblical significance of the name are provided by Driskell and Brittain (116 ff.).

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⁷ O'Connor's frequent ambiguity regarding death with respect to her characters has led critics to disagree over how, and sometimes even whether, they die (Tanner, Mr. Fortune, Julian's mother, etc.). The question here is not whether Tanner dies but the nature and extent of involvement by the black actor in the death. Walker, for example, observes that "he stuffs [Tanner's] head, arms, and legs through the banisters of the stairway 'as if in a stockade,' and leaves him to die" (54). Whether Tanner's actual death occurs after, before, or during the stuffing, the actor's assault(s) must be taken as its major literal cause. The figurative causes (typically precipitating the literal), in this story and other pertinent ones, have to do with character deficiencies in the victims themselves.

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Faint Echoes and Faded Reflections: Love and Justice in the Time of Cholera

CLAUDETTE KEMPER COLUMBUS

Contemporary critical readings of the chronicles of the conquest of the Americas show them to have been as revisionary, as generically heterogeneous, as differing in styles, and as “fictive” as Gabriel García Márquez’s chronicle novels. The lengthily ruminative *Autumn of the Patriarch* is based on a historical incident: the night of Venezuelan General Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s precipitous fall from power. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, as its title states, seems an overt chronicle and focuses on how “people below” cannot resist the weight of custom and history. Although *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is “the chronicle of a family in one town,” it also panoramically and “historically” represents a whole world.¹ After reading thousands of Simón Bolívar letters, in *The General in His Labyrinth* García Márquez chronicles Bolívar’s last days by way of the “metachronicle,” or Bolívar’s responses to information on events as he hears of them. And *Love in the Time of Cholera* can be read as an exemplar of high satire in chronicle form.

Although high satire draws on tropes of irony, such as an unspoken level of meaning that opposes the manifest level, unlike irony, high satire aims for social change.² *Love in the Time of Cholera* on the manifest level seems to support sentimental notions that it attacks on the latent level. The reader who accepts sentimental values promoted on the manifest level misses the novel’s savage satiric thrust. As sentimentality

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blunts the perspicacity of the characters, of their understanding of the historical moment in which they fail to find themselves or read themselves, it reveals similar blundering and missing of the spirit of the letter on the part of a sentimental reader.

Sentimental notions distance a character such as Dr. Juvenal Urbino, who has dedicated himself to the eradication of cholera, from comprehending those historical events that cholera as an angry metaphor invokes. Cholera is a metaphor for a diseased society, for social irresponsibility, and for relationships that pass as "love" relationships. A case in point: during a trip through blue sky in a low-flying balloon, Dr. Juvenal Urbino looks down through a spyglass at a plantation of human bodies and remarks, "Well, it must be a very special form of cholera . . . because every single corpse has received the coup de grace through the back of the neck" (226-27). The balloon trip sequence offers in condensation the protagonists' relation to historical events. Although Urbino's comment, "it must be a very special form of cholera," can be read as an ironic trope (the latent meaning contradicts the manifest meaning), the doctor's inaction and the distance he as witness preserves, the actions he does not take, the absence of social change contain satiric ferocity. Not a second's reflection on Urbino's part reveals to this protagonist how he himself exemplifies a key problem of his historical moment. That the historic letter it is his mission to deliver is mislaid as soon as he delivers it and is never seen again (227) indicates the eclipse of moral or reflective presence and performance. He fails to comprehend the import of loss of mission in the unmaking of his nation.

Irrespective of how fabulous the content, the chronicle form invokes historical contextualization, and therein historical accountability. Stereotypically for the era and for his class, Dr. Juvenal Urbino becomes a satiric part of documentable history by being out of history, by over-flying historical events, as it were. It is as if, to paraphrase Doris Sommer's title, *Foundational Fictions*, this García Márquez "chronicle" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows how the epoch has lost even the fictions of foundation. The chronicle highlights historical "overlooking." Where Dr. Urbino's father is said to have fought and died from actual cholera in an aerostatic balloon, his son with his eyes to the spyglass, his son's displaced letter of mission, his son's wife, Fermina Daza, seeking memories of her past from the balloon, all indicate faint-heartedness, faint memories, and social obliviousness as the novel's underlying historical pattern.

Irony, in Anatole France's inimitable definition, is like a discussion

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between a Catholic and a Protestant in which both are converted. The play of levels of meaning in irony subverts certainty and inculcates a cast of mind that includes questioning the possibility of achieving social change. The satirist, however, by drawing blood, actively seeks social change.

Satire's whip as plied by Juvenal never failed to be recognized as a whip. In contrast, Swift was threatened with physical punishment for writing satire that went unrecognized as satire. Swift had aroused sentimental readers who objected to his modestly proposing that Irish babies be fricasséed for English consumption. Where reader sentimentality lies, there, it would seem, the reader is most blind to satire. Similarly, when *Love in the Time of Cholera* features sentiments out of contact with reality, it encounters readers inclined to believe that the enchanting García Márquez is not attacking their own cherished sentiments. It is unsurprising that *Love* continues to be read as being about love rather than a satirical attack on imitations of love and imitation heroism, imitations that fail to make contact with reality or to intervene in historical events.

Many readers read *Love* with the comfortable conviction that García Márquez is a "magical realist" and forget that he is an open partisan of the far left. This paper argues that he is writing about the vast majority of us entering the twenty-first century supposedly enlightened on psychological, social, and environmental issues, but actually substituting our own narcissistically sentimental selves. García Márquez suggests that we could and should situate and address historical "reality" ("reality" is a word that recurs frequently in his work). So it is that, by keeping ourselves the objects of our sentimental gaze, we remain out of time and out of touch, like the characters in *Love*, distanced from the historical events of which they are the components.

But, as indicated, although García Márquez plies satire's excoriating whip, he wraps it in the velvet of an absolute equanimity of tone. The nonjudgmental, urbane to florid narrator as chronicler, recorder of events that could have taken place in the post-Bolívar years between the 1820s and the immediate future,³ seems to preserve a safe distance between the reader and the text, as if the reader were outside that world, innocent of complicity with a narcissistic society, innocent in a history of planetary despoliation and social injustice that imperil nations and species.

This paper summons the suspicious reader to take a second look at the events recounted, at the benignity of the novel's protagonists, personages whose failure to address socioeconomic problems is

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exacerbated by sentimental practices and behavioral models that defer ethical issues. The time of cholera symbolizes styles of avoidance of reality, a disease symbolic of our times, the contagion spread in part by the narcissism of readers, soft on critical self-reflection. For if the chronicle includes its readers in the pointedness of its historical thrust, the "innocent" narcissism of the characters reflects our own.

If this novel depicts through Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino readers who read in a mode that Paul Ricoeur has made known as the hermeneutics of belief (32–36), then it could be an assault on velvet readers, insulated by their courtesans. This novel may be a critically unfashionable summons to those among us who are more cynical (but not necessarily less hopeful of change) to read in the mode that Ricoeur refers to as the hermeneutics of suspicion. If read so, the text of *Love* splits onto two levels, one representing the lovers as lovers, and the other doubting these characters can love. Many readers will believe in the happiness of *Love*'s ostensible hero and heroine, Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza, when they finally consummate their relationship in their eighties (and our 1980s). Other readers may consider their happiness more than suspect.

The sentence, "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded [Dr. Juvenal Urbino] of the fate of unrequited love," opens the novel-chronicle. The word "always" is one indication that this text should be looked at twice, for Dr. Juvenal Urbino has only the rest of the day to live. (The name "Juvenal," of course, points to satire, but so does "Urbino," whose "innocence" is nonetheless stressed.) In retrospect, the reader may see the "always" ominously suggests truncated duration; there is almost no time left.

Dr. Juvenal Urbino is checking on the suicide by cyanide on Pentecost Sunday of his great friend the photographer (about whom he knows next to nothing) Jeremiah de Saint-Amour (either Saint Love or *sans* love). Saint-Amour's deepest devotion is to chess. As it turns out, he is an outlaw, a cannibal, and a fugitive from Cayenne sent to that notorious prison for a violent and heartless crime. For years, Saint-Amour had maintained at his beck and call a mulatto mistress in the old slave or red-light district (example number one of love). When Urbino visits her, although "Everything looked wretched and desolate" (12) in "this death trap of the poor" (16), the poor are riotously celebrating Pentecost. The satirical doubleness of the text is furthered when the mulatto mistress professes that she prefers a back-alley life to any other.

The two contrastive perspectives in which Saint-Amour's beloved is

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introduced allow the reader to decide whether a back-alley life "lived with a devotion and submissive tenderness that bore too close a resemblance to love" (13) represents the absence of love, or whether "a clandestine life shared with a man who was never completely hers, and in which they often knew the sudden explosion of happiness" (14) represents a true love. The reader may also wonder if the relationship between Urbino and Saint-Amour represents true friendship; the only affinity between the suicide's "soul's friend," Dr. Urbino, and Saint-Amour "was their addiction to chess."

Dr. Urbino bears up under the shock of his friend's suicide remarkably well, even though he misses Sunday mass for the third time in his life. But he is fortified by being able "to bear other people's pains better than his own" (8). Where his own care is concerned, he doctors himself on a regular basis with drugs, cares so much for his personal appearance that he is a dandy, and, as a bookworm, shelters himself from domestic distress and other historical realities. He detests animals, but has come to terms with the presence in his ancestral house of a parrot, bought as a provocation by his wife, because he had proclaimed that "Nothing that does not speak will come into this house" (23). That fateful Pentecost, the parrot fatefully escapes.

[Dr. Juvenal Urbino] had forgotten that he ever owned a parrot from Paramaribo whom he loved as if he were a human being, when suddenly he heard him say: "Royal parrot." His voice sounded close by, almost next to him, and then he saw him in the lowest branch of the mango tree.

"You scoundrel!" he shouted.

The parrot answered in an identical voice:

"You're even more of a scoundrel, Doctor." (41)

"Royal parrot"'s double referent (for the phrase could refer to that other bird, the doctor himself) sets up an oscillation of comparison between the education of the doctor and the education of the bird. The doctor has polished his education in Paris, and every afternoon instructs the bird by summoning "the most diligent reserves of his passion for pedagogy,"

until the parrot learned to speak French like an academician. Then, just for love of the labor, he taught him the Latin accompaniment to the Mass and selected passages from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. . . . (20)

As the quotation demonstrates, however, the parrot has progressed beyond mere imitation and ascended into inventive insult — "You're

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even more of a scoundrel, Doctor." But the doctor's education has made an absolute parrot of the doctor; he does not go beyond imitation.

Although most people look fondly on parrots,⁴ the mythologies of several Latin American peoples show that the *campesino* tends to regard the parrot as a parasite bird. The parrot eats a great deal, destroys crops, imitates voices not its own, and is relatively inedible.⁵ It is, of course, not easy to demonstrate that García Márquez intended this juxtaposition of sentimental and practical perspectives on the parrot. But he did intend the satirical reflection on Dr. Juvenal Urbino of birds that speak, for they twice signal his downfall. He has an affair with a black "bird," the black woman Barbara Lynch, who owns a troupiel, a black "bird." Barbara Lynch brings about Urbino's fall from marital grace; his wife's parrot brings about his mortal fall on Pentecost Sunday.

Without rising above the ingestive, digestive, excremental, and imitational, Urbino woos his future wife Fermina properly but in a perfume of crows' shit, and drinks too much anisette with her father, then exploding in "star anise" vomit at home. Barbara Lynch suffers from "twisted colons" (243). The romantic Florentino suffers from constipation. As anyone who reads Swift knows, the satirist's vision is not only traditionally incongruous, but traditionally excremental. The array of lovers reaches excesses of anality (possessiveness) and orality (permissiveness), both extremes that confound perspective.

The theme of imitation (constipation) restricts actions to exercises in imitation. What passes for interaction occurs when an imitation interfaces with a mirror image or with a literary echo. For instance, the non-poet Florentino, who has enjoyed a sentimental education (63), is an echo chamber of allusions to the "real thing": Florentino is comprised of echoes of the Spanish Golden Age, of Spanish Romantic poetry, of Quixotic love. He echoes the heroes of Italian mock epics, of illustrated "dime" novels, of Dante's long devotion to the idealized woman child, Beatrice. Further allusions add to the jarring contrasts of satire: Florentino dresses like Vallejo (54); his sudden, unexpected sexual initiation by a woman who is to remain forever unknown by him echoes young Neruda seduced in the dark at a wheat harvest; the corpses in the river recall Chile after Allende's death. These allusions linking Florentino to historical personages and events are, however, free of substantive similarity. They slide from one to the next with the lightness of emptiness. Dante, Vallejo, Neruda represent love of the polis or political responsibility to their people, and artistic accomplishment. Florentino, however, who takes no prizes in poetry contests, and

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who does not even speak for himself, does not embody any excellence or altruism.

Florentino's styles of writing are as unstable and as variable as he is. When Florentino first attempts to deliver a letter of love to Fermina, bird shit falls on it.⁶ These letters establish a love object rather than build up interaction with an actual recipient of love. At one point, Florentino uses the body of a woman to mark the efficacy of his writing. With an arrow of blood, he writes "*This pussy is mine*" on the belly of Olimpia Zuleta (vulnerable Olimpia's name is as satirically incongruous as gullible Juvenal's). Florentino "forgets" to expunge this doubly false mark of possession; if her pussy is not her own, it may be said to be her husband's. Florentino's "arrow of blood" causes Olimpia's husband to assassinate her. When Florentino buries his demented mother "in the former Hand of God Ranch, which was still known as the Cholera Cemetery," he discovers Olimpia Zuleta's name "scrawled [in red paint] in the fresh cement of the crypt, and he thought in horror that this was one of her husband's sanguinary jokes" (217).

In this text, imitations or untruths are matched by figurative emptiness, motifs carried, for instance, by mirror images and by the "Immortal Photograph" of Fermina and her cousin. The "Immortal" image becomes faded and is misplaced. The young women, dressed up for a Belgian photographer, "giggled when they looked in the mirror and saw the resemblance to the daguerreotypes of their grandmothers" (133; they imitate life of another time). One copy of the photograph is found much later hidden "along with the fossil of a thought in a letter that had faded with time" (134). When Florentino observes Fermina's reflection in a restaurant in a mirror with an elaborate Venetian frame, he manages eventually to buy the mirror and hang it, so that he can possess "the place inside that for two hours had been occupied by her beloved reflection" (228).

But Florentino, although endlessly inscribing (shit is also a metaphor for copying styles past their prime), although endlessly inscribed (constipation is a metaphor for the blockage inherent in a sentimental and imitative education), is no more aware of the historical circumstances than anyone else is "in time." He is so "befuddled that he was unaware of the state of the world" (70). Fermina also is out of history. She dresses in outfits that date her only by "costume," by externals. When Florentino courts this counterfeit, she changes from her schoolgirl outfit into a "faded reflection," a Greek shift (59). The commemorative mirror in which her reflection no longer is, the dreams

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through which she strides "like a queen from another time" (229), clearly show she inhabits no time and that she images an empty life.

Though she herself does not become aware of it, Fermina's absence has destructive social consequences. Hers is a double tale of long-lived love (she loves her husband) and irremediable immaturity (she loves him not; also vice versa). When Urbino dies, she begins to burn his wardrobe. "'It is a sin to burn this,' she would say, 'when so many people do not even have enough to eat'" (301). But she does not desist from sinning; she does not redress reality or emend social history; she has the things shifted from "their places of privilege to the stables that had been transformed into storage bins for remnants. . . ." (301).

Finally, in the latent text of this satire, suspicious readers who suspect the true lovers who ply "forever" up and down the river on the river boat named *The New Fidelity* are not surprised to find that García Márquez also refers to the ship as the floating fiesta. No more lasting than Dr. Juvenal's initial and terminal "always," these lovers' "forever" cannot be but short term, both in personal terms because of their advanced age, or in terms of the setting, for they float back and forth "forever," up and down, avoiding an environmentally depleted planet. On *The New Fidelity*, triumphantly, Fermina, who detests eggplant, cooks a dish Florentino christens "Eggplant al Amor."⁷ On the floating fiesta, Fermina discovers "that roses were more fragrant than before, that the birds sang at dawn much better than before, and that God had created a manatee and placed it on the bank at Tamalameque just so it could awaken her" (344). Playing the waltz, "The Crowned Goddess," on the violin, the very well-versed Florentino serenades his one true love, who gives him nightly enemas. "The words I am about to express: / They now have their own crowned goddess" is the novel's prefatory quotation by Leandro Díaz. Evidently nothing has transpired between beginning and ending. It was

as if they had leapt over the arduous calvary of conjugal life and gone straight to the heart of love. They were together in silence like an old married couple wary of life, beyond the pitfalls of passion, beyond the brutal mockery of hope and the phantoms of disillusion: beyond love. (345)

The satiric contradiction between manifest and latent meaning is naked: for these lovers, the heart of love is beyond love.

Readers who read with suspicion may suspect that the novel's conclusion excoriates narcissist, immature and self-indulgent, near-sighted happiness. The lovers float safe and free under the duplicitous yellow flag of cholera they are flying as they ply a river with banks

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depleted of animal and forest life. These lovers have been separated for their mature lifetime, she in her marriage to Dr. Juvenal Urbino, a marriage made for financial security and because her financially squeezed, embezzler father desired the marriage and so did her cousin, and because she had set a limit of age twenty-one to the unwedded state. For his part, Florentino has spent his time waiting for her by diverting himself with innumerable one-night stands and any number of affairs. One affair that lasts for two years is with his fourteen-year-old ward. He abandons this youngster when he discovers that the bells he hears that fateful Pentecost Sunday on which Saint-Amour commits suicide mean that Jr. Urbino, the husband of his "beloved," has died. His ward commits suicide when she discovers Fermina's letters and realizes that her elderly guardian, the child molester, has long been "in love with" and has left her for a more than traditionally older woman. He receives the news of her suicide while aboard *The New Fidelity*.

Readers who read with sentimental "crowned goddess" hopes in their hearts will not be suffocated by the sentimentality of the "Crowned Goddess" waltz Florentino plays for Fermina on *The New Fidelity*, or wonder at Florentino's brand-new, flashy shipboard outfit, or at the fortune he has acquired; nor will they ask if that yellow flag they sail under signals metaphoric cholera on board this ship of state, this "sentimental" chronicle of our loves, with its aged honeymoon ending.

What these characters lack is what Lacan calls the real and in which he situates the gods, that is, human value. What is missing from their lives is a real context or even those dreams through which history shapes networks that knit the individual to other people. Missing are love, justice, and the general welfare.

Many critics have paraphrased what Lacan means by the real, but significantly, Jameson correlates the real to history.⁸ In *Love*, the real, that is, some awareness, even unconscious, on the part of its characters of their roles in history, has been sacrificed to what Lacan calls the gaze. What escapes from the grasp of gazing is the truth. What escapes is history, the history that is a sense of oneself in a world that goes beyond oneself and in a world with genuine associations with others based on mutual recognition of valid symbols of value. Gazing, says Lacan, is "that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness" (74). Visionary seeing, or the seeing that transcends the imaginary and comprehends some portion of the symbolic, that is, that perceives authentic connections with others and that requires that a person mark the pre-existence of a given-to-be-seen. A person must

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grant that something exists besides that person's own tastes, desires, and "education," something beyond inscription/imitation/constipation.

Instead of making some contact with pre-existence and thereby achieving some insight into the actualities of time, however, the narcissist commits a "profound *méconnaissance*" (Lacan 74). The narcissist sees only himself or herself seeing only himself or herself; this "represents mere sleight of hand" insofar as knowledge is concerned (Lacan 74). More, seeing only oneself blocks vision. For the creation of the imaginary is comprised of misreadings and misunderstandings that Jameson sums up as "optical illusions" (105).

Kristeva argues that the narcissist "protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation" (24). To make something of that emptiness, to prevent its lasting interminably, one must recognize lack *as* lack. One must recognize substitutions as substitutions, as illusions. The parrot may bark more effectively than a watch dog, but a parrot is not a dog. The photograph is not of the grandmothers, but of two mortal cousins preening themselves out of their present. The mirror that Florentino purchases does not even have the honesty of a specular reflection, so out of touch even with Fermina's image at several removes is Florentino. These two lovers, like Florentino's mistress, Sara Noriega, exist on pacifiers, that is, on false organs, on false images, on false values.

The only even approximate contacts with the real in *Love* are offered by black or mulatto women who are, of course, misread, misunderstood and abused. Leona Cassiani is the "true woman in [yes, Florentino's] life although neither of them ever knew it":

He could not help thinking what he thought: black, young, pretty, but a whore beyond the shadow of a doubt. He rejected her from his life, because he could not conceive of anything more contemptible than paying for love: he had never done it.
(182)

As for Urbino, frozen in time and in prejudice—"In my opinion, the nineteenth century is passing for everyone except us" (105), the man could only make love to the mulatto woman who aroused his passion, Barbara Lynch, in the time it took to give an injection. Urbino also is lost in misreadings, a doctor who likes to repeat that he fell in love with his wife as the result of a clinical error (105); he thought Fermina as a young woman had contracted cholera. Symbolically, of course, the young woman had succumbed to cholera some time before then.

The publication of a journal named *Justice* is yet another example

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of narcissist falsification and misinterpretation/unintentional truth-telling in loveless *Love*, the name as sarcastic as the naming after popes, sons who are to bear illegitimate sons. For the editor's sole purpose in founding *Justice* is to attack families who belong to the Social Club, from which the editor has been excluded.

These editorial lies, the doctor's misdiagnosis, the "lovers'" affairs and falsifications nonetheless bear real consequences that are perhaps most poignantly emblemized by mother love that goes to inordinate lengths and that, in the case of Florentino's mother, leaves the mother mad. Tránsito, "In Transit," bears Florentino out of wedlock, devotes her whole life to decorating and redecorating their house "under the gaze of" his future bride (that *casa* of emptiness so significant in any number of Latin American novels). When the bride does not materialize, the mother, "regressing" into a children's story, "steals" the name "Little Roachie martínez" (214). When even mother love ends so, clearly other forms of love, not to mention justice, must also be "imaginary," as "over-flown" as historical accountability is shown to be in this chronicle-novel. Social justice is as narcissistically privatized as the "new," the floating fidelity: self-deceptive and self-absorbed, unself-reflexively cruel, childish, and, in the end, insanely out of touch.

NOTES

¹ See Bell-Villada, 11.

² In my research I have as yet come across no reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera* as satire. The computer facilities at Hobart and William Smith Colleges library are invaluable insofar as cooperating libraries maintain up-to-date database bibliographic entries; the database includes *MLA* and four other index utilities; for García Márquez, a political science print-out appears as well. Even brief book reviews appear on the print-outs. For other bibliography, see *Gabriel García Márquez: An Annotated Bibliography*.

³ The two cholera epidemics in the text suggest approximate historical parallels: (1) six years before the crisis of the 1899 civil war (106), Dr. Marcus Aurelio Urbino dies of cholera; (2) an epidemic rages after his son, young Dr. Juvenal Urbino, returns from Paris (111). But the several intervening, even more vaguely dated epidemics show that cholera metaphorically represents a spreading social contagion, as when the Cholera Cemetery (217) becomes the Universal Cemetery (218).

⁴ One sentimental reader refused to believe ill of a parrot.

⁵ Several anthropological studies have made note of the parrot as a despised bird in Latin American mythologies; see for instance the myths from the Huarochirí area of Peru compiled by Francisco de Avila circa 1600.

⁶ I have my colleague, Edgar Paiewonsky-Conde, to thank for pointing this out.

⁷ Differences in tone and genre notwithstanding, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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could have been one of the inspirations for *Love in the Time of Cholera*: "Orlando had bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank that she now sat on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*" (IV). Like *Don Quixote* (probably the source of *Love's* jests on eggplant, since Sancho Panza "has heard"—and echoes—that Moors are great lovers of eggplant [Part II, Chapter III]), *Orlando* is another inspirational precursor reflected in many twentieth-century Latin American texts.

⁸ "It is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself. . . ." (Jameson 104).

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Samuel Beckett's *For to End Yet Again*: A Conflict between "Syntax of Energy" and "Syntax of Weakness"

LI-LING TSENG

After *Comment c'est* (1961) the size and scale of Samuel Beckett's prose writing diminishes considerably. This *volte-face* in his choice of expressive strategy—from baroque “extravagances” (*How It Is* 67) of his middle phase of fiction-writing toward disintegration and miniaturization—has drawn considerable attention from critics. Olga Bernal notices a “disintegration of language” since *Comment c'est* (quoted in Sherzer 49). Raymond Federman characterizes this shift in Beckett's narrative method as “to delyricalise, to destylise the language of fiction, to designify the words” (28). George Lukacs, from his socialist perspective, naturally dismisses Beckett's narrowing and apparently nonreferential scope of writing as an undesirable “attenuation of reality.”¹ Steven Connor, however, notes Beckett's later works evincing a new style gravitating toward a calm, calculated, scrupulous, though austere and disconcerting direction (93, 100). H. Porter Abbot argues that Beckett's later works are carefully structured upon “radical displacements” (224, 228). J. E. Dearlove and Laura Barge agree that Beckett's dramatic stylistic change is actually a logical development of his earlier practices. They sum up this emerging style as being characterized by, among other things, the concept of an integral self being collapsed into an impersonal and omniscient voice, a rigid, mathematical, scientific framework, and fragmentation of consciousness, being, and fiction (Dearlove, “Last Image” 105; Barge 277).

This new direction of minimalist writing was prefigured in the thirteen *Texts for Nothing* (1950–52) and *From an Abandoned Work* (1955)

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after Beckett experienced a creative impasse in writing the almost self-destructive *The Unnamable*, the third part of the *Trilogy* (1947-1949). After *Comment c'est*, *Le Dépeupleur* (1965) remains the only work whose length is comparable to the *Nouvelles* (1945).² Whereas Beckett experiments with techniques of restraint, fragmentation, and displacement, the only thing left out of this distillation process is unmistakably "the essential."³ Style, which is purged of extravagances, is this essential element that stands out. As well phrased by Connor, style has replaced Beckett's earlier concern with the unwieldy matter of being and existence to become the "bearer of meaning" (100). This new "style of indigence" and "poetics of deprivation" is significantly substantiated by syntactic considerations and possibilities (Knowlson and Pilling 241; Harvey 392). Orthodox syntax is considerably subverted to achieve a desirable effect of "weakness." This "syntax of weakness" Beckett would appropriate and perfect throughout the period of the sixties and seventies (Harvey 435).⁴

Indeed, by 1962 Beckett had felt a strong need for seeking the "solace of form" which is "adequate" (Dearlove, "Syntax Upended" 126). Syntactic subversions take place to dismantle grammatical conventions and hence grammatical logic. In practice, the syntax of weakness deliberately leaves out grammatical units which normally would be considered indispensable. "Narrative cohesion as normal syntax creates" is thereby justifiably severed (Pilling, "Review Article" 99). Accordingly, "compression" is favored as the choice of Beckett's new style of writing (Rabinovitz, "The Self Contained" 51, 53).⁵ Besides, the syntax of weakness has a strong preference for, and therefore enjoys manipulation of, words with ambivalent functions. It relishes resonant assonance and alliteration. Consequently, it gratifies Beckett's increasing interest in sounds and in composing a new brand of "lyrics of fiction."⁶ It circumvents the direct exploration of pathos in favor of an incantation of ambiguities. In essence, it is "a syntax that operates on our sensibilities by insinuation rather than assertion, by its infinite suggestibility rather than by its vehement rigour" (Pilling, "The Significance" 149).

Beckett's awareness of the need of a new form which, in his ideal, attempts to disturb or violate "the nature of being" as little as possible (Harvey 435), starts to take effect in *All Strange Away* (1936) and persists through the major short prose works of the sixties, such as *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965), *Ping* (1966), and *Lessness* (1969), and finally extends toward and culminates in works of the seventies, some of which are included in *Fizzles*, such as *Still* (1972) and *For to End Yet Again*.

(1975), and such uncollected ones as *Sounds* and *Still 3* (1972–1973).⁷ These texts all embody Beckett's ideal to achieve a nonrelational grammar of its own kind by means of an emasculated syntactic structure and choice of words and thus to simulate a state of the least disturbed silence and stillness to which many of Beckett's protagonists and characters in his earlier long fiction have aspired.

The road to perfection, however, is not all that smooth. During one decade of experimentation (1963–1975), Beckett was striving toward perfection of this new poetics which accommodates his vision of this period best. Yet, the old "art and craft" and "extravagances" occasionally re-emerge to disturb the practice of the new way of writing (*Enough* 139). *Enough* (1963) and *As the Story Was Told* (1973) can be considered a break in this series of writings of the sixties and seventies from the continuity of "weakened" and "personless" writing. Their reintroduction of the I-narrator marks the sharpest contrast to the rest of the series which attempt a pseudo-scientific and objective approach in the choice of point of view.

Two years after the composition of *As the Story Was Told*, Beckett wrote *For to End Yet Again*, whose minimal length and syntax directly relate to the dominant "poetics of indigence" of the period. "Poverty," or to use Beckett's own words, an "insuperable indigence," may be highlighted as one of Beckett's most important stylistic characterizations of this period (*Proust* 112). Beckett in *For to End Yet Again*, too, extensively employs the "syntax of weakness" in pursuit of an objectified narrative. *For to End Yet Again* overlaps with previous writings so far as similar themes, motifs, and syntax are concerned. Its relationship with *Lessness* is especially interesting, not only because both works employ similar décor and characters but, more significantly, because each manifests a similar transitional tendency from a syntax of weakness to a syntax of energy.⁸ *Lessness* has been described by Gontarski as a "trick" of "pulling words out of a hat" in its extremely free arrangement of sentences and lack of logical connection between them, yet Beckett still maintains a control of human will in his creative process (14). In like manner, *For to End Yet Again* demonstrates this entanglement of the dominant syntax of weakness and a surreptitious reinscription of the more normal syntax of energy. The "syntactic energy" of *For to End Yet Again* lies in its numerous "grammar-intact" sentences and its excessively figurative language. Coinciding with this "syntactic energy" is a kind of "semantic contiguity" (Bruns 182). *For to End Yet Again*, indeed, treats the workings of the imagination scenically and systematically as if the narrative sequences were cinematic shots.

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Like *Lessness*, described by Beckett himself as "composed of six statement groups," *For to End Yet Again* can be divided into six scenarios. Each is complete, with its own décor, setting, lighting, characters, and motion, the dramatic and kinetic nature of each marking a major departure from *Lessness*, whose six component groups are essentially statemental (Esslin 118).

(1) The Skull Scenario

Scenario one sets up a background for the rest. The claustrophobia of earlier short prose settings here reaches an extreme: a "closed place," a "box" (179) or a "case chamber" (as Beckett puts it in MS 1551/3)⁹ is what remains of the rotunda of *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* and the cube of *Ping*. The lighting in this scenario is also residual. If any light is to be perceived, it is exceptionally faint and dim. What were at least bodies in the "closed place" of the earlier short prose is now a mere fragment—a "skull" with "no neck no face" (179)—hence even the illuminated face in *That Time* ("old white, long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread") is figural by comparison (*Collected Shorter Plays* 228). Perhaps only the "mouth" ("faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow") of *Not I* can be analogous to the extremely localized depiction of a human head in *For to End Yet Again* (*Collected Shorter Plays* 216).

The setting and décor of this scenario are of a piece with the fragmented syntax. Even when several sentences seem about to embody grammatical integrity, the elimination of one or more elements prevents this (e.g., "never light so faint as theirs so pale" [179]). It is when the text starts to pursue "semantic contiguity" that its syntax begins to embody strength and energy. It is then that grammatically normal sentences start to creep into the narrative. It is as if the skull scenario confronts the imagination with such an extreme reductionism that, in reaction, it exerts itself to produce images and motions: "There in the end all at once or by degrees there dawns and magic lingers a leaden dawn" (179). Not only does this call to mind the "subjective imagination" in *Lessness*, where the narrator also exerts his will power to ensure "He will curse God again" (Finney, "'Assumption' to *Lessness*" 76), but the sentence's grammatical integrity and colorful language have their counterparts in the second part of the above quotation from *Lessness*, too ("as in the blessed days face to the open sky the passing deluge" [156]).

In *Lessness*, when the narrator's "subjective imagination" is at work, his language becomes poetic ("the blue celeste of poesy") and his sentences integral. The same situation recurs in *For to End Yet Again*.

Though willed, the evocation of creative inspiration—"there dawns and magic lingers"—is no less "magical" than Proust's involuntary memory (*Proust* 34). Quite different from the "miracle" of rediscovering the bodies in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, which reaffirms the narrator's perceptual faculty, the "magic" here highlights the narrator's visual desire as a consequence of imagination's hunger for objects.¹⁰ The arrival of inspiration is dramatized by the word "there." The narrator makes no attempt to disguise his intention to create: "Thus then the skull makes to glimmer again in lieu of going out" (179). When the skull starts to glimmer—either because of its own will power and initiative, or because of a change in lighting—it spins out sequences of images and human figures. The image of light which, in the earlier shorter prose, suggests the power supply of the imagination, is once again employed to dramatize the sudden circuit-connection between the imagination and the imagined—"as if switched on" (179). The genetic nature of the imagination is epitomized in the metaphor of "within without [the skull]." The skull transforms the need to imagine from within to the actual creations without.¹¹

The word "magic" is one of "a thousand little signs" indicating the narrator's resourcefulness in activating the imagination (*Imagination Dead Imagine* 147). From the beginning, the language of *For to End Yet Again* is deliberately archaic and poetic, as if such a linguistic appeal would expedite the process of imagining.¹² "Pent" in "skull alone in a dark place pent bowed on a board" (179), meaning "shut up within narrow limits" or "closely confined, imprisoned" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), is an archaic usage. Then again, in MS 1551/2, the skull glimmers "instead of going out," but this is corrected to the Gallicized "in lieu of going out." The sense of "defamiliarization" is here generated more by archaic or foreign words than by the syntax of weakness.

(2) The "Expelled" Scenario

The evocation of the muse coincides with the use of three successive metaphors: "to dawn," "magic," and "leaden." Imagination, in its ability to produce images, is like a dawn which magically dispels darkness and reveals the shape of the universe. As a matter of fact, the interplay between the images of light and darkness has always been reinstated as one of the major structural as well as thematic concerns in Beckett's works from *Imagination Dead Imagine* on. The spontaneity of the inspirational strength ("all at once") is no less dynamic than the splitting asunder of walls in *Lessness*. This enables the "magic of craftsmanship" to transform the lighting from black to "leaden grey"

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(Knowlson and Pilling 253). The claustrophobic confines of the dark place in the first scenario are demolished; instead, the "cloudless sky" and the wide expanse of "dust" and "desert" become "mock confines" (179). The "endlessness" of the *Lessness* setting recurs, as does the "he"-character among the ruins. The motif of the ruins as a refuge of the mind again brings the issue of imagination to the fore. Indeed, the "eye" is almost as important as the "he"-character himself, who is self-evidently the protagonist in this scenario. The "eye" stages a "long desert to begin" (179). Imagination's earnest intention to create concrete objects can best be depicted in Beckett's choice of "desert" in preference to "empty" (MS 1551/2). "Empty" would echo the "black void" of the first skull scenario; however, the eye wills itself to envisage something concrete. Even a "desert" (though understandably empty) is more positive than the abstract vagueness of "empty."

The "resurrection" of a human figure (Cunningham 349), or the reintroduction of the "personal accent" (Pilling, "Beckett after 'Still'" 285) is indeed encouraging in a context of "hell air" (179), which can be compared to "Hell this light" and "timeless air" of *All Strange Away* (117, 118).¹³ But the narrator's enthusiasm for imagining leads him to go further than *Lessness* which, at best, reconnects the third-person pronoun with its character. *For to End Yet Again* identifies the character with the "expelled," a word apparently referring to the title of one of Beckett's *Nouvelles*, not to mention its more immediate allusion to the Bible. However, except in the occasional pensive moments when he raises his eyes to the sky for help, or when, in confessional mood, he admits he is "in love with hiding and prone position" (*The Expelled* 25), the first-person narrator/protagonist of *The Expelled* is too truant to resemble the "expelled" in *For to End Yet Again*. If any connection is to be made, the I-narrator of *The Calmative* is perhaps the most promising, since he embodies the same concerns as the narrator of *For to End Yet Again*. The most relevant remark *The Calmative* narrator makes is: "for we are needless to say in a skull" (43). The "issueless predicament of existence" has been embodied in the image of a "man . . . alone trudging in the sand" (like the he-character of *Lessness* and "the expelled" here), and has been condensed to a skull-like box (cf. "box" [179])—"the man alone thinking (thinking!) in his box" featured in a piece of criticism Beckett wrote as long ago as 1945 ("McGreevy," *Disjecta* 97). No doubt the skull is the ultimate cause which inflicts human misery. Throughout the writings of the sixties, the issue of the skull is only shelved, rather than solved, by Beckett's alternative emphasis on the "eye of prey." Herbert Blau convincingly argues that

the "compulsive" and "unrelieved" gaze in Beckett's later works which feature the theme of the eye of prey often turns into "speculation," a tendency dangerously bearing affinity to Cartesian self-reflection which is tautological by nature (79). As the opening scenario of *For to End Yet Again* demonstrates, the development of the theme of imagination has ultimately to be concluded in a skull. *The Calmative* narrator wills himself to tell a story in order to fend off the slow failing and dying of his skull, as if stories might provide nutrition from which his declining ability to imagine could be regenerated. In *For to End Yet Again* the imagination stages the same den-like ruins and solitary tramp-like figure as in *The Calmative*.

The same fragmented syntax and weak past participles as have been employed in describing the bodies in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping*, and *Lessness* almost turn the expelled into an object—"all that little body from head to feet sunk ankle deep" (179). Nevertheless, like the body in *Ping*, the expelled's eyes are the only thing "unover"—"last bright of all" (179). The glimmer of his eyes echoes the glimmer of the skull. In addition, though the body's arms and legs are immobile, the arms' strength in cleaving to the trunk and the legs' potential to flee imply some mobility. It is significant that a grammatically normal sentence should coincide with the suggestion that the expelled might muster strength to move: "The arms still cleave to the trunk and to each other the legs made for flight." Just as the geographical expanse present here mocks the confines of the first scenario's "box" and "skull," so the creation of the human figure, together with its potential for movement, aims at restoring "the days of the light of day" (179).

Two distinct qualities of "the days of the light of day," which eventually should promise a "hypothetical happiness"—the chronological and the religious—are once again restored as in *Lessness* (Dearlove, *Accommodating the Chaos* 141). The "haughtiest monuments" which have been engulfed by the deep sand function in the same way as the "deluge" in *Lessness*, both testifying to the existence of the past. The dust which permeates the air was "once" "here and there," too. It is the narrator's memory which confirms that the dust has been derived from previous times. The tactic of bringing to mind talismanic objects from the past is but one of the inclinations which the narrator inherits from his predecessors, notably the one in *Lessness*.

Concatenated with the narrator's intention to establish a chronology is the archaism and "poesy" of his language, as if the issue of time must invariably induce the same degree of figurative language as in the description of the Proustian time: "that double-headed monster of

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damnation and salvation" (Proust 11). The sentence, "Sand pale as dust ah but dust indeed deep to engulf the haughtiest monuments which too it once was here and there" (179), appeals not only to the visual but also to the aural ("ah") imagination. The past-tense "was" establishes a time scale. The alliteration of "indeed deep" reinforces the poetic image of the monuments which themselves resemble those of Shelley's "Ozymandias," in which the fragments of the statue—"trunkless legs of stone" and a "shattered visage"—lay "half sunk" in the sand (Shelley 550). That poem's celebration of the triumph of art over human mortality is arguably another of the narrator's aspirations in *For to End Yet Again*. The tendency to poeticize produces an abundance of archaic words. Although excessive archaism has been considerably curtailed in the final text, it is symptomatic that Beckett's working drafts should reveal the intense "poesy" to which *For to End Yet Again* initially devoted itself. As it is, the printed text's residual "poesy" far exceeds that of *Lessness*, whose "subjective imagination" almost annihilates its coexistent syntax of weakness.

MS 1551/3 and 4 indicate that "too" in the above example evolved from the archaic "sooth" and similar examples abound throughout this scenario. "Bourne upon bourne" (MS 1551/2) was the alternative to the present "verge upon verge" (180), and "foes" (MS 1551/2) to "enemies" (180). These archaic words and expressions are in due course expunged, though "among" (MS 1551/4) is replaced by the archaic "amidst" (180). If retained, the archaism could not only have induced "poesy" but also enhanced the sense of immemorial time. For example, "grey cloudless sky bourne upon bourne timeless air of those nor for God nor for his foes" (MS 1551/2) would have created an arresting sensation of eons of stagnation and would have inhibited the progress of the linear time. The fact that the archaism is eventually dropped is due not so much to the curtailment of a "weakened" way of writing as to the narrator's conviction that he must dispel "timelessness" and "changelessness." Though considerably alleviated in comparison with the void of the first scenario, a need to end the endlessness in this scene eventually impels the narrator to move on to the next one—the dwarfs.

Religious evocation is also used by the narrator to dispel the intensive stasis. However, the religious reference is not so functional as that in *All Strange Away*, where prayers were almost said. The reference to God here can be seen as a residue from the religious allusions in *Lessness*. In both cases the religious element supplies the narrator with external (historical and human) reality and a fund of associations.

(3) The Dwarfs Scenario

The change in lighting proves to be crucial in the evolution from one scenario to the next; the black in the first gives way to grey in the second and to white in the third. This gradual permeation of light links the first three scenarios together. The tendency to make "white" glimmer coincides with the general direction of Beckett's prose works from *All Strange Away*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, to *Ping*, texts which have, as it were, gradually distilled their pigments in order to draw a "white sheet across the tempest of emblems" ("Alba," *Collected Poems* 15). Scenario three is talismanically comprised of two white dwarfs who draw a "white sheet" across a "litter" with shafts, a pillow and possibly a dead body on it. The change in lighting from grey to white is by and large prompted by "the eye." When the "changelessness" of the previous scene is too intense to activate the potential movement of the expelled, the eye of imagination must either focus hard until its creations emerge ("There again in the end way amidst the verges a light in the grey two white dwarfs" [180]), or look wherever it is likely to observe what it wants to observe ("mere whiteness sighted from afar" [MS 1551/3]). The omission of the past participle "sighted" in the final text does not, however, obscure to any great extent the importance of the eye of imagination. The dwarfs' movements and their equipment (the bed, sheet, etc.) are all observed from what the narrator later, in scenario four, describes as a "bird's-eye view" (180): "a litter seen from above" and "Bone white of the sheet seen from above" (180). The narrator's position has been further removed from the "surface" of the sand (from which he has observed that "a fragment comes and falls" [179], as the result of the observing eye's adjacency to the observed—the expelled), first to "afar" and subsequently elevated to mid-air. The aerial overview of the entire sequence of the dwarfs' advancing face to face and carrying a bed between them is analogous to the vulture's "eyes of prey" which consume their victims.

The narrator's aerial outlook in this scenario, however, is by no means so remote that he cannot impose his own desire upon what he sees. Herbert Blau suspects that one of the two implications of Beckett's relentless search for objects, as it were, as evidence of "thingness" is that the perceiving subject actually "projects the objects in accordance with the logic of its own desire" (79). The desiring eye of imagination can be illustrated by the magic of "there" and the dramatic tone of "in the end" (cf. "at last" in MS 1551/3). No sooner does imagination delegate a bird's-eye view than it starts to interact with the imagined. The two imperative sentences ("Let him veer to the north. . . ." and "Let one stop short. . . ." [180]) are more explicit than those of the *Still* trilogy in

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which the "weak" syntax makes the personal plea to "leave it so" (*Still, Sounds*) and "try dreamt away" (*Still 3*) sound rather wistful. Instead, this explicitness achieves the effect of "provisionalism" such as one finds in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* in their colloquial use of "say" and in itemizing examples. These two imperatives are like a stage direction set out by a playwright who is improvising in order to establish his characters' dramatic behavior. However provisional they may be, if only because of the wistful thinking involved, these two imperatives do embody the narrator's underlying preoccupation. Whereas, at the end of scenario two, no sooner has the "deep sunk" expelled actually moved ("comes") than he "falls" and reverts to immobility, in this scenario the narrator is uncertain whether to let his characters go on or "stop dead" (MS 1551/2). The natural bond between the two dwarfs, the litter, was thrice dismissed: "they drop the litter" (MS 1551/2, 3, 4). The present version, "they let fall the litter" (180), reflects the narrator's reluctance to discard an external object which has become very important in the light of imagining.

The narrator's divided sensibility achieves, at best, a constant reversal of the two dwarfs' roles—when one stops short, the other carries on. Although at times the dwarfs are inclined to "let fall," if not "drop," the litter, they can always dexterously "take up again without having to stoop" (180). Their kinetic quality is suggested either by means of highly emotional metaphors and similes or by increased grammatical normality, examples of which are especially frequent in this scenario:

"they toil step by step through the grey dust";

"Slowly it sweeps the dust";

"they are so alike the eye cannot tell them apart";

"They carry face to face and relay each other often so that turn about they backward lead the way";

"From time to time impelled as one they let fall the litter then again without having to stoop";

"At the end of the arms the four hands open as one and the litter . . . already settles without a sound" (180)

Compared with "weak" fragmented phrases and clauses, such grammatically normal sentences embody a verbal strength which coincides with the dwarfs' mobility. Moreover, the narrator openly employs very telling similes which reinforce the kinetic strength of this scene. The dwarfs' perfect sense of direction and their resolution to persevere is compared to the coxswain's adroitness in steering a rowboat: "His who follows who knows to shape the course much as the

coxswain with light touch the skiff" (180). MS 1551/2's superlative—"with lightest touch"—best illustrates the narrator's emphatic intention.

There may or may not be a body on the litter which the dwarfs are carrying: "swelling the sheet now fore now aft as permutations list a pillow marks the place of the head" (180). The uncertain and spectral quality of this observation is superbly re-created by the syntactical arrangement of keeping the subject ("pillow") remote from its preceding present participle ("swelling") and by the use of this "pillow" to insinuate the "place of the head." Although both "swelling" and "pillow" contain the internal double "l" spelling, the distance between them is so great that "swelling" looks to the reader's eyes as if it is not being followed by the subject which is supposed to be a "head." Although the "pillow" marks the place of the head, its attribute as object somehow invalidates this statement. Whether or not the body is (or has been but is not now) in the litter and whether or not it is a dead head (or body) remains shadowy and ambiguous. Other evidence of Beckett's resourcefulness in hints and allusions can be found here. Golgotha, which appeared in Beckett's 1938 poem "Ooftish," is the place where the body of Christ was taken off the cross and literally means in Aramaic "[the place of] the skull." The empty skull may be analogous to the empty cross (as it may boil down to the "blood of lamb," *Collected Poems* 31); however, this possible religious implication could help to reduce the hermeticism of the "litter" and "head."

The above sentence also contains an element which betrays syntactic ambiguity and weakness, namely, the over-explanatory simile—"as permutations list." This phrase is actually syntactically ambiguous, as "list" can be a noun and a verb. However, its interpretation is dependent upon the major noun "permutations." The swelling of the sheet could be less in accord with the swinging created by the dwarfs' amble ("now fore now aft") than with variable "permutations." This word brings to mind the various positions of the Emmo/Emma characters in *All Strange Away*, not to mention one hallmark of Beckett's long fiction: the inexhaustible lists in *Watt* (1942) and the permutative play in *Molloy* (1947).¹⁴ This simile, therefore, cancels and disrupts the disappearance of the body in the litter and the objectified tendency contained in the rest of the sentence.

The imagining eye's natural inclination is to give birth to its creation. Therefore, when the "leaden grey" of the previous scenario becomes too static, a variation in lighting, a recruitment of new dramatis personae, and even a redefinition of the setting are inevitable. The new characters, the dwarfs, are as white as the "same wilderness" (180), the

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same post-holocaustal scenery as in *Lessness*. Owing to the soaring position of the imagining eyes and the vast desert which swallows up even the "haughtiest monuments," the eyes cannot tell the two dwarfs apart. Besides, more important, they advance in the sand, bound to each other as if they were one, not so much because of the litter between them as because of some kind of inner drive which "impels" them to act in concert. The shadowy body in the bed is never more than a mark on the pillow. Therefore, although on the surface this scenario seems multiple in comparison with the previous two, the underlying atmosphere is still one of emptiness and desolation. The plural form of "solitudes" used in MS 1551/2, 3 indicates the narrator's wish to surpass the solitude of the grey desert setting. As in the choice of "desert" over "empty," Beckett finally settles for "wilderness." The setting is just as monotonous as the dwarfs are solitary, but "wilderness," a concrete, geographic word, functions better than "solitudes," an abstract and yet emotion-embedded word.

The above similes and images contribute partially to the "poesy" of this scenario, which is mainly composed of archaism and figures of speech. The "bed" (MS 1551/2, 3, in relation to which "litter" and "couch" [180] are archaic usages) which the dwarfs are carrying is equated with the fecal image—"dung" (cf. "dung-litter" [MS 1551/2])—but qualified by the dramatically dismissive words, of "laughable memory." The litter, then, is either too freighted with implications or too inseparable from human memory, for the dwarfs effectively to "drop" it. Just as the narrator finds the external object indispensable, so he is apparently either repelled, or awed, by the "monstrous extremities" of the dwarfs' defective mobility and by his own detailed inspection ("skulls stunted legs and trunks monstrous arms stunted faces" [180]), both of which have been prerequisites of Beckett's "style of deprivation" which substantiates a type of "physical immobility that leads to freedom of movement in the inner world" (Rabinovitz, "The Self Contained" 51). The physical extremities have been identified with Beckett's earlier fictional characters. Take the narrator of *The Calmative* for example. Far from being alarmed or appalled by physical disability, he apologizes to the young shepherd at the seaside because there is not enough blood in his "extremities" for him to blush (40). The colorful adjective "monstrous" here shows that the narrator ceases to deem human deformity as one of the means to reach stillness as did his predecessors in the short prose.

In addition to "litter," "couch," and "amidst," other archaic words are evident in this scenario. "Slew" in "Let . . . the other about this pivot

slew the litter" (180) may well be sailors' slang but is also an archaic word for "swing" (MS 1551/2). The manuscripts reveal even more archaism. The dramatic quality of the twice-used imperative "let" can be verified by a similarly exclamatory (and archaic) word in MS 1551/2: "Let one stop dead and the other about this pivot swing the litter through a semicircle and lo the roles are reversed." "Lo" is a very dramatic word, appealing to the visual imagination which is gaining importance from one scenario to the next. MS 1551/2 also renders a highly poetic version of "'Tis this dung-litter of laughable memory with shafts thrice as long as the bed." Although the printed text restores the more colloquial use of "It is," it employs yet another archaic "couch" to replace the quotidian "bed." Though the hyphen between "dung" and "litter" is dropped in MS 1551/3, the emotional wording stays the same thereafter. The richness in language in this scenario demonstrates the inadequacy of barren ruins as a mental refuge. Instead, the narrator attempts to supervene the everyday world by constructing an imaginative asylum of the mind (Knowlson and Pilling 189).

(4) The Eye Scenario

The imperative voice is retained in the fourth scenario, whose setting remains the same "grey cloudless sky" and "dust," and yet whose protagonist's role has been allocated to a "bird's-eye view." However, "Yet to imagine" (180) is not so second-person oriented as "imagination dead imagine" in *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. The former clearly points to the stage appearance of the eye of imagination—"Between him and it [the dwarfs' whiteness] the bird's-eye view" (180). The second and third scenarios, then, are brought together under an inclusive aerial perspective. For the first time the interrelationship between the expelled, the dwarfs, and "the eye" is made clear. Since the observing eye has thus already assumed an aerial post, the emphasis of this scenario shifts from the *Still*-like "close inspection" to a general survey of the setting. The eye perceives a seemingly growing desert. The "stark erect" expelled and the distant white dwarfs have become signposts for the eye to define a "mock confine" for the endlessness of the scenery. The eye quickly reminds itself of what has happened at the end of scenario two, namely, "a fragment comes away from mother ruins" (180). Even when its attention still follows the dwarfs' movement, the eye is more interested in the interaction between itself and the dwarfs' eyes. The dwarfs repeat the same joint ambling as if one, the difference here being the concentration on their facial details, which has serious consequences for this scenario. The dwarf who faces forward performs the important movement of the

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"he"-character in *Lessness*—hoisting his head. The upward tilted position of the head would, in *The Expelled*, have meant seeking help from the sky: "I raised my eyes to the sky, whence cometh our help" (24). Here the dwarfs follow their course as if receiving instruction from above from time to time, whenever they raise their heads to the sky. However, the narrator's full control over his imagined creatures falters. Some technical difficulties (perhaps physical obstruction or failing imagination) in the eye's monitoring of the dwarfs prevents it from seeing them "go driftless" (181). But when the dwarfs' faces suddenly move "closer and closer" to the observing eye, the latter declares that it can achieve "no more than two tiny oval blanks" (181). The "close inspection" now once again gains control of the scene. The "two tiny oval blanks" suggest the loss of normal eyesight. "Blindness," or impaired vision as a result of the reduced distance between the observer and the observed, necessitates a radical change. It is at this moment that the eye surges above the "cyclopean dome" (which probably hampers its vision) and expresses its wish to turn the grey sky into white, a whiteness which according to the syntax here can be equated with "the bump of habitativity" (derived from Latin "habitare"), or "love of home" (181).

Though this scenario ends with two colorful metaphors and with an expression of the narrator's intense desire ("yearns"), it is the most "weakened" scene so far in that for the first time the narrator's observation and imagination are acknowledged to be inadequate. Even the all-inclusive bird's-eye view cannot perceive the dwarfs' "lidded eyes," which consequently must be a purely imaginary detail. Scenario four pays lip service to *Still 3*, in which the narrator looks into the imagined faces so closely and specifically that he is able to distinguish "eyes" from "lids." That the "lidded eyes" are here a result of conjecture, not observation, indicates the alienation of the eye of observation from the observed, and implies the involvement of the faculty of imagination. However, not only the narrator's bird's-eye view but also his imaginative ability are failing in the sense that the latter cannot, like its predecessors (particularly in the *Still* trilogy), "still" the turmoil and can only regret for the very "little" that is "still" (180–81).

The narrator's "craving" for "stillness" is considerably increased in this scenario, his bird's-eye view eliciting a conclusion as regards the expelled: "Little body last stage of all stark erect still amidst his ruins all silent and marble still" (180). This sentence embodies the distinctive traits of the syntax of weakness in that its strength lies in ambiguity. The tension between miniaturized syntax and "linguistic multiplicity" has been noted by Leslie Hill as forming a destabilizing factor in the textual

development (178). As a result, the multiple readings yield potential for interpretive "play." Given the narrator's imaginative activity in the previous two scenarios (in dispelling the void in the first and resorting to eyes of observation and imagination in the second), to end up with only "the little body" which is now juxtaposed with the "last stage of all" cannot but be read as a sign of failure. However, the "last stage" may be understood as the little body's being "stark erect," "still amidst his ruins," and "marble still," which is in tune with Beckett's vision since the early sixties. When the "art of impotence" starts to take effect, all movement (of humans and objects alike) as well as the landscape is permeated with a sense of "torpor" (181). Whereas the same description of a fragment coming and falling at the end of scenario two is described by means of a simile ("like cork on water" [180]) and a forceful verb ("breaks"), here the fragment "scarce stirs the dust" with its "slow fall." Even the expansive grey sand has reached a finite stillness—"dust] can engulf no more" (180). Owing to the observing eye's remoteness, although the dwarfs have emerged in the dust as if "sprung from nowhere" (181) and have been moving, they appear "motionless" (181). But the narrator's residual "piercing sight" cannot abide failure. Even when the dwarfs take the initiative to approach their observer, closer than "say arm's length" (*Still* 3), the narrator strains his eyes, hoping to maintain his omniscience. When the imaginer's sight is blocked horizontally, it inevitably has to rise vertically "atop the cyclopean dome," where it can once again aspire to a change in lighting. It "yearns white to the grey sky," equating "white" with *The Expelled* narrator's "hope from the sky" which is, in this case, "bump of habitativity" and "love of home."

The narrator's failing eyesight induces sentimentality in this scenario. The narrator's lamentation—"woe" (180)—is that only "the little on the surface of the dust" is still. "Woe" is no less literary or emotional than "so much the worse for the little" (MS 1551/2) and "pity" (MS 1551/3). It is this sentimentality which accounts for the choice of "mother ruin" (180) which has the same structure as "beldam nature" in "Closed Space" (200). However, the metaphor of "mother" resonates with the "love of home," both introducing human sentiment. Though a scenic description and an architectural term, "cyclopean dome" is derived from the giant Cyclops in Greek mythology, just as the rotunda in *All Strange Away* resembles the Pantheon at Rome. "Cyclopean dome" thus evokes the image of a one-eyed mythological figure who may or may not be identified with the narrator. Indeed, the narrator's aerial eyesight resembles that of a giant. It is only in this context of "height"

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that the dwarfs' sunk heads, let alone their "lidded eyes," escape and impair the narrator's vulture-like omniscience.

(5) The Still Scenario

After a few attempts at "change" ("First change of all" [179]), the narrator's failing eyesight acknowledges a "last change" "in the end" (181). In accordance with the decrease in the "availability" of objects, the potentially mobile he-character (once and for all) fails and lies still, stretching out amidst his ruins, just as the narrator has already twice envisaged the falling of a fragment. Only when the observed object lies motionless can the already failing eye of observation execute detailed and localized inspection, as in previous works. Renouncing its vulture-like post, it descends to the same level as that of the prostrate body and for the first time identifies with its observed object. Just as the sky is cleared of its vulture-scorpions, so the text now is free from an omniscient point of view which reconnoiters at once the eye of imagination and the imagined objects. Instead, it will maintain a more restricted, objective third-person stance.

The description of the expelled's prostrate stillness, reported from this objective point of view, comes closest to the passages in *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping*, and *Lessness* which have delineated human bodies as if they were corpses. In this scenario, the fallen body of the expelled is still showing signs of breathing, signs which are hardly perceptible in the midst of the massive ruins and dust. But once again, as in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Sounds*, it seems plausible that signs of breathing can coincide with the state of being "soundless still" (181). This scenario evokes both acoustic and visual responses. That the body's "exhaling scarce ruffles the dust" (181) first creates a sound-free milieu which invites the reader to listen intently for any disturbance, and then activates the visual imagination, since "ruffling" suggests tiny waves of dust. It is a consequence of the visual appeal that the most important color variation—"blue"—should appear for the first time. Now that the narrator has renounced his aerial perspective, the body's blue eyes become the dominant focus in this scenario. Like the "unlustrous black and white" eye of *Ping* which (implicitly but emotionally) implores silence, the body's eyes here cling to life. Not quite so objectified as "the doll's," the body's eyes have neither been injured by the fall nor blinded by the dust. The body's "undying" eyesight, therefore, conveniently serves as a surrogate for the narrator's discarded omniscient point of view. The whiteness of the dwarfs is now perceived through the body's blue orbits, thus establishing a link between the observer, the expelled, and the observed, the dwarfs. However, the expelled's perception is

moribund: the dwarfs have dropped the litter and remained still as in the expelled's "days erect" (181). The prostrate body, together with the dwarfs' stillness and the silent ruins, momentarily constitute a "last state" of things (181). The previous suspicion that the expelled can ever see the whiteness of the dwarfs is now dispelled. The expelled's residual eyesight enables him (and the reader) to "believe" the existence of the dwarfs.

No sooner are stillness and soundlessness consummated than the narrator's acoustic desire effects a *volte-face*. The increasingly dramatic depiction of the body's falling ("as though pushed from behind by some helping hand or by the wind but not a breath" [181]) foreshadows the actual dramatization of a voice addressing the expelled in the second-person, murmuring "never fear no fear of your rising again" (181). The use of "or" in "Or murmur from some dreg of life" reveals the narrator's uncertainty on reaching the "last state" of "being." MS 1551/2 shows very clearly that it is the "breath" which is murmuring: "but no a breath. Or murmured from some dreg of life after the long stand fall fall you'll never rise again." Not only is the source of the murmur explicit here, but it sounds true-to-speech. MS 1551/4 is even more contemptuous: "never fear you can never rise again," which recalls "he'll never say I any more, he'll never say anything any more" in one of the *Fizzles*, "I Gave Up Before Birth" (198). Though MS 1551/3 transforms the past participle ("murmured") into an ambivalent verb/noun form ("murmur"), its content remains the same as in MS 1551/2. The final version, "no fear of your rising again," is considerably less dramatic. However, the outspokenly self-contradictory way of putting together "not a breath" with "or murmur" differs from the noncommittal attitude of *Imagination Dead Imagine* as regards the acoustic desire: "Only murmur ah, no more" (147).

(6) The Skull Scenario

The evocation of the acoustic imagination at the end of scenario five leads to two rhetorical questions which revolve the scene once again to that of the skull—that "last state" of reality to which the narrator finally returns. The first and last skull scenarios are therefore the framework for the drama occurring in between, complete with exposition, climax, and dénouement. This finale questions the "thereness" of the intermediary drama: "litter and dwarfs ruins and little body grey cloudless sky glutted dust verge upon verge hell air not a breath." It effectively asks whether or not the end of all this is the "sepulchral skull" (181). As if complying with the format of a rhetorical speech which always ends with resolutions, "to dream" (as in *Sounds*) of

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a place "where no sound to listen for no more than ghosts make or motes in the sun" is apparently what should be striven for. May's insistence in *Footfalls* on hearing all her footsteps ("May: No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet, however faint they fall" [*Collected Shorter Plays* 241]) has been renounced; however, the narrator challenges the validity of this resolution with a question mark.¹⁵ The narrator then spontaneously rejects his determination—"No"—as if he were refusing to acknowledge the "fixedness" ("all set" [181] or "all fixed" [MS 1551/2]) of this goal. His clinging to imaginative power is as steadfast as ever—"as though switched on" (182). The poetic tendency even affects his perception of the dream resolution: "all the footsteps of all the ages" (MS 1551/2) "can never fare [note the archaic usage] nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere" (181). Hence, when the imagining eye perceives "that certain dark" again, it always replaces this seeming end with "yet another end" (182). Unlike the limbo state which *The End* narrator was in—"without the courage to end or the strength to go on" (70), the narrator here seeks another end in his imagination, if "there had to be another [end] absolutely had to be" (182). The scenarios which consist of the earth, sky, expelled, dwarfs, litter, etc. can recycle endlessly. The "sepulchral skull," from which the whole cycle originates and with which it ends, now appears as a pretext for the narrator "to end yet again." Indeed, in the very first scenario, "the skull makes to glimmer *again* in lieu of going out" (emphasis added). Thus the skull serves as an impetus for the narrator to embark upon a "magical" journey beneath a "cloudless sky" where the white dwarfs (also stars of low luminosity and relatively small mass and size), together with other objects, are enclosed by the "orbits" of the eye of imagination (Krance 96–101).¹⁶

To round up the discussion of the relation between syntax and Beckett's perennial pursuit of the "last state" of "being" in *For to End Yet Again*, one can discover that the conflict between the syntax of weakness and syntax of energy constitutes the major source of destabilization in the text, an element having been much more felicitously resolved in *Still*, *Sounds*, and *Still 3*, where Beckett's masterly practice of the syntax of weakness is more thoroughgoing. The dominant syntax of weakness in *For to End Yet Again* minimizes the presence of concrete and referential décor, setting, and human characters. The relevant narrative logic as conditioned by the foregoing constituents is also vacated. As rightly put by Brater, only a "verbal kineticism," that is, fragmented speeches and sentences, substantiates the centralized human figures and consciousness to become the protagonist in Beckett's residual works

(7). However, this already minimal and residual verbal kineticism, in the case of *For to End Yet Again*, undesirably ferments the actual destabilizing motion. Whereas this syntax contrives to disintegrate logic, the very act of disintegration, to use E. M. Scarry's words, produces its own "logical ramifications" (279). Hugh Kenner, too, speaks of Beckett's typical strategy in his works of the sixties as "equat[ing] syntax with logic" (29). That is to say, Beckett's persevering practice of the syntax of weakness, though paring down the resort to grammatical logic, formalizes a substitute and "off" logic of its own kind. (Cf. "what kind of imagination is this so reason-ridden?" "A kind of its own" in *Company* 45.) However, this syntactic control exhibited in *For to End Yet Again* fails to tone down the note of "urgency" still remaining from his less successful results of earlier practices. In other words, this syntax does not exempt itself from the encroachment of a less strenuous syntax, extending its normality and then variety, and finally stretching a "strength" and energy in the style of expression. To appropriate Abbot's observation, *For to End Yet Again*, like other short prose works of the similar period, reinstates a "sure" (hence "strong") "formal control" (227). The restoration of human characters who aspire toward movement and human sentiments in the text suggests that Beckett's minimalist discipline to restrain imagination's natural inventiveness has now been relaxed. Accompanying this loosened hold on imagination's will power is the "syntax of energy." A "transition from lessness into endlessness, the shift from ultimates to penultimates or even antepenultimates" has taken place (Cunningham 350). Therefore, by the time of *For to End Yet Again*, Beckett's experimentation with the syntax of weakness has come full circle. On the one hand, the syntax of weakness still dominates this work, whose English translation was undertaken only two years after the composition of the *Still* trilogy, in which the result of the experiment had proved more satisfactory. On the other, the syntax of strength signals the end of a decade's experimentation with syntactic weakness.

NOTES

¹ Discussed in Abbot, 227, footnote 13.

² *Nouvelles* refers to "L'Expulsé," "Le Calmant," "La Fin," and "Premier Amour." They were all written in 1945, though the first three were published in 1955 (Paris), and the latter in 1970 (Paris). See Pilling (*Samuel Beckett* 229) for publication details. The English translations *The Expelled*, *The Calmative*, *The End*, and *First Love*, referred to below in my text, are collected in *Collected Shorter Prose* 1-70. *Trilogy*, though published later, was begun and composed during 1945

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and 1947. *Le Dépeupleur* was begun in 1965 and published in 1971 (Paris); the English translation, *The Lost Ones*, was published in 1972 (London). See Pilling (Samuel Beckett 230, 232).

³ Cf. Beckett, "The Essential and the Incidental" 111. See also Brater, "Still/Beckett: The Essential and the Incidental" 4.

⁴ In a conversation with Harvey in 1962, "Beckett spoke of the essential difficulty experienced by one who is given to making with words (rather than sounds or colors); of the need for a 'syntax of weakness.'"

⁵ Rabinovitz speaks of Beckett's technique of "utilizing a compressed style" in writing the "Fizzles," including *Still* and *For to End Yet Again*. The "governing principle" in *Ping* is "compression," too.

⁶ Chapter 5 of Cohn's *Back to Beckett* is entitled "Lyrics of Fiction."

⁷ According to the introduction of the Calder edition of *For to End Yet Again and Other Fizzles* (1976), although the French *Foirades* (with the exception of *Immobile*, which was originally in English as "Still") were translated in 1973–1974, "Closed Space" and five other fizzles (i.e. "He Is Barehead," "Horn Came Always," "Afar a Bird," "I Gave Up Before Birth," and "Old Earth") were written since 1960. Therefore the *Fizzles* should be considered as works belonging to the sixties. *For to End Yet Again* does not belong to the English translations of the French *Foirades*. It is the direct translation of *Pour finir encore*, undertaken in December 1975, as dated in Reading University Library, England: MS 1551/2. *Still*, *Sounds*, and *Still 3* followed closely one after the other and were all works of 1972–1973. They share the same concerns with kinesthetic, aural, and stylistic stillness; therefore they can be conveniently grouped and termed as the *Still* trilogy, an echo of Beckett's middle-phased, full-length *Trilogy*, though on a drastically diminished scale. *Sounds* and *Still 3* can be found in MS 1396/4/50 and MS 1396/4/52.

⁸ Rabinovitz in "Fizzles & Samuel Beckett's Earlier Fiction" (317) details the close relationship between *Lessness* and *Fizzle 8* (*For to End Yet Again*) in terms of echoes of phrases, structure, and episodic events in both works.

⁹ Beckett's typescript drafts of the English translation of *For to End Yet Again* are in MS 1551/2–5.

¹⁰ Blau in chapter 4 (entitled "The Bloody Show and the Eye of Prey") of his *The Eye of Prey* employs the Derridean theory of the erasing/erased, or displacing/displaced, writing to demonstrate the mutual displacement in the relationship between the perceiving eye and all that it gazes upon.

¹¹ Read asserts that the eye's hunger for objects is motivated by the artist's need to create and imagine. As a result, the conflict between objects in the real world and those existing in imagination ensues (116).

¹² Both Pilling ("Review Article" 99) and Dearlove (*Accommodating the Chaos* 143) discuss the archaism in *For to End Yet Again* and other "Fizzles."

¹³ Dearlove also discusses the "personal" quality of the return of the pronoun "he" and "his" capability for motion (*Accommodating the Chaos* 125). Finney, too, states that *For to End Yet Again* resumes "an earlier discourse" because the "pseudo-objectivity" which Beckett's short prose texts since *Imagination Dead Imagine* have maintained is "breaking down" ("*Still to Worstward Ho*" 66).

¹⁴ The years given here for Watt and Molloy are those of composition.

However, *Watt* was published in 1953 (Paris) and 1963 (London); *Molloy* in 1951 (Paris) and 1959 (London) in *Three Novels*. See Pilling *Samuel Beckett* 229–30.

¹⁵ Two question marks appear in MS 1551/5, whereas the previous versions (MS 1551/2–4) end the first two sentences in this scenario with a full stop.

¹⁶ Krance elaborates the galactic theories of black holes and their counterparts—white dwarfs and associated phenomena. He contends that the two categories of galaxies constitute “equals-but-opposites.” By the same token, the Beckettian logic perpetually fails to be “totally sucked into the plenum-void,” which the theory of black holes stipulates: the opposite “white dwarfs” are unfaltering equals.

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JAMES SULLIVAN, an instructor of English at Bradley University, has recently published an article in *Contemporary Literature* on the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. His current project is a study of American poetry broadsides since 1960.

THE 1992 TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE PRIZE IN LITERARY CRITICISM

Professor John Keeling has won this year's TCL Prize in Literary Criticism for his essay: "The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's 'Litany.'" The entries this year were judged by Marjorie G. Perloff, who is Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities at Stanford University. Among her many books re *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991) and *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1989). She has also edited a collection of essays—*Postmodern Genres* (1989)—and the contemporary section of *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*. She writes:

John Ashbery's long double-column poem "Litany," which appeared in the volume *As We Know* in 1979, has baffled critics, the relationship of the two columns to one another being especially puzzling. This essay reads "Litany" as a "magnetically perplexing polyphonic dialogue" that builds the process of creative "(mis)understanding" into its very fabric; the poem invents "a landscape in which the constructedness of the 'filter' between artist and experience . . . is continually tested, scaled, and inverted." Rather than imposing a particular theory of subjectivity onto Ashbery's poem, the essay tactfully takes its leads from the text itself, studying the "two voices which are expressed at the same moment in time" with great sensitivity and expertise. The focus is on the "moment of unraveling," the moment when the "bullet" of time reveals itself in all its strangeness and terror. In the rigor of its analysis and the attention it pays to the nuances of Ashbery's poetic structuring, his particular mode of self-interrogation, this is not only the best reading we have thus far of "Litany," but a model on which future Ashbery studies—indeed poetry studies—can build.

The *Twentieth Century Literature* Prize in Literary Criticism is awarded annually to the author (or authors) of work submitted to the journal during the preceding year which is judged to make the most impressive contribution to our understanding and appreciation of the literature of this century. Nominees are chosen by the editors of TCL and members of the journal's editorial board. A different prominent scholar and critic of modern literature serves each year as judge. The prize includes publication in our Summer issue and a total cash award of \$500. All essays submitted to the journal are eligible.

The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's "Litany"

JOHN KEELING

John Ashbery has written, "Any art, once it leaves the studio, is going to be misinterpreted for better or worse—'misprision' is the term used by Harold Bloom for our fertile misunderstanding of the poet's aims. It often seems that the artist's role is precisely to make himself misunderstood, that misunderstanding and appreciation are much the same." (RS 258–59)¹

It is not ironic that, in this response to the work of Mark Rothko, Ashbery echoes critical reaction to the poet himself. For the intimacy and distance that grow out of "our fertile misunderstanding[s]" are constantly put into play on the canvas of Ashbery's poetry. Moreover, the tension generated in any attempt, by artist or critic, to demarcate subject from object, metaphor from experience, is integral to the artistic process. It is no wonder, then, that Ashbery is of two minds concerning Rothko's "caveats" to his audience:

And in most cases, one had to ignore [Rothko's] statements about [his] art if one wanted to go on loving it.

We were always a little embarrassed at esteeming his work for wrong reasons that he foresaw and continually warned against.

(RS 258–59, my italics)

I have lifted and restructured these lines in order to mimic the decentered sensibility of "Litany," which would have been a work in progress at the time "Abstract Expressionism," the article quoted above, was published. My purpose is to suggest that the artist's "role," to make himself (mis)understood, not only defines the artist in relation to his/her audience, but also in relation to him/herself. Misunderstanding as a sought-for activity emphasizes the materiality of an art object and its

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context, and calls attention to the subjectivity of experience. Such an activity denies an artist the comfort of a single perspective, but, as the second column above indicates, does not preclude understanding or, rather, "appreciation"—an acceptance, perhaps, of the limited understanding that can be attained by any single, somewhat fixed subject position held by an artist. In Ashbery's poetry, this process (this moving between the columns) is translated as an attempt to graph the coming in and out of being of the moment of appreciation and misunderstanding.

It might help, as I shift my focus to "Litany," to consider an instance where Ashbery acts as critic of his own work: "Every once in a while I will pick up a page and it has something, but what is it? It seems so unlike what poetry 'as we know it' is. It's a question of a sudden feeling of unsureness at what I am doing, wondering why I am writing the way I am. . . ." ("Art" 44)

Ashbery's pun on the title of the far-reaching collection which contains "Litany" might serve as a guide to our reading of the long poem. The misrecognition/recognition that he makes explicit in the lines above is enacted throughout the referential interrogation of our reality(ies) by the magnetically perplexing polyphonic dialogue of "Litany." Ashbery has said that most of his poems are "about the experience of experience . . . the way a happening or experience filters through to me" ("Experience" 245). If we consider this a step away from what we might view as the chaotic formlessness of unmediated experience, and from the seamless cocoon of a fixed moment, we can better understand the tension that, for Ashbery, emerges from life as we experience it, or, I should say, as we construct, perceive, and re-live it. In other words, Ashbery is interested in what he calls the "permanent unraveling" of the moment as it is lived and reflected upon ("Imminence" 75). And here we may return to the idea of Ashbery, the artist, as (mis)interpreter himself, uncomfortable with either the proliferation of chaotic formlessness or the spatializing of fixed moments, taking that anxiety as his 'subject,' as the source for "fertile misunderstanding(s)."

This kind of general perspective is useful, I would argue, as we start to read "Litany," for the number of plot lines we could begin to trace seems virtually limitless.² Though we might wish to impose a much narrower framework on the body of the poem—for example, we might read the poem as a meditation by a poet who is taking stock of his career thus far and preparing for the future—it is best, I think, to keep foremost in our minds the former concern, as a provisional metaphor for our reading of the poem. Indeed, this enables us to follow Ashbery

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whether he is meditating on a particular moment in time (or succession of moments); on an abstraction, philosophy, or idea; or on the nature of speculation itself. For me, "Litany" demands such openmindedness as it grapples with the anything but fixed materiality of our world, and with the rhythm of a (re)creative process (in which what we value as reality is constituted) both internal and external to an individual subject, a process which is alienating yet inviting, continuous yet confounded by temporality. In "Litany" Ashbery works out of a landscape in which the constructedness of the 'filter' between artist and experience (ingeniously highlighted by the white space between the columns and the dialogic discourse between the two) is continuously tested, scaled, and inverted—a project alienating artist from self and experience—which leads, naturally, to a re-evaluation of the relationship among these constituents.

We begin the poem in the midst of such a struggle with the limitations of experience and with our accounting for experience:

For someone like me
The simple things
Like having toast or
Going to church are
Kept in one place.

*So this must be a hole
Of cloud
Mandate or trap
But haze that casts
The milk of enchantment*

Like having wine and cheese.
The parents of the town
Pissing elegantly escape
knowledge
Once and for all. The
Snapdragons consumed in a
wind
Of fire and rage far over
The streets as they end.

*Over the whole town,
Its scenery, whatever
Could be happening
Behind tall hedges
Of dark, lissome knowledge.* (3)

We appear to be in the middle of a description, a cataloguing if you will, of scenery and methodology of/for experience. We can certainly recognize a kind of collage of images in these stanzas, and we may, perhaps, see in the first stanza, first column, an anti-hierarchical, anti-ideological approach. More important, both voices appear to be commenting on the inadequacy of this description as a way of knowing—in both there is something that remains hidden (that "escape[s] knowledge," as in "*whatever could be happening/Behind tall hedges/Of dark, lissome knowledge*").

As you can see, I am emphasizing the common subjects of the two

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columns—both are detailing the “town” and both speak of this activity in terms of “knowledge”—although each seems to be on a slightly different track, or radically different, depending on how they are read. Even their differences, however, can affect the way we read the columns (individually or together) in significant ways. For instance, the conflation of “church” and “toast” into “simple things” in the first stanza, first column, surely influences our reading of the more abstract “milk of enchantment” in the corresponding stanza in the second column, and vice versa. Similarly, the “parents” who are “pissing elegantly” humorously suggest what might be going on “behind tall hedges.” The point here is that this ironic echoing can drastically change the tone and sense of the poem. Thus, in my reading, I attempt to privilege neither voice; and no matter if the voices are meant (at any given time) to mimic one another, to repeat one another, to contradict one another, or to have nothing to do with each other, I view them as two voices which are expressed at the same moment in time, which thereby offers us a point of similar origin (temporally) and invites comparison. In this paper, then, I will not continue to compare and contrast the two columns, but, instead, I will refer to them in terms of the struggle I see in both, and I will make use of those lines from both which contribute to my understanding of this struggle that is, in some sense, shared between the two.³ Neither of the columns can simply be identified with the poet, with an independent/parallel voice of experience, or with any single subject position. At times the columns seem to come together, at times seem to stay distinct. Both, for my purposes, will be referred to as Ashbery. As Ashbery puts it in the poem, “Two/Could go on at once without special permission/And the dreams were responsible to no base/Of authority but could wander on for/Short distances into the amazing nearness/That the world seemed to be” (16, my underlining). And indeed it seems that to come to a fuller realization of self in the world, one must break from any single “base/Of authority” to “wander,” as far as one is able, through the labyrinth of one’s perceptions.

In any case, we began with an awareness of something missing or not visible, of an incompleteness in the description of the scene, and I think the engine which drives the first section is the desire to inspect and understand this ‘present absence’ of a kind that Ashbery finds in a variety of contexts and perspectives, and which problematizes our past, present, and future reflection. One way in which Ashbery proceeds in this kind of meditation is to succumb to the competing stimuli of the present environment. This might take the form of an interruption, “the casual purring of a donkey/Rouses me from my accounts” (3), or of a

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mysterious and seemingly arbitrary connection, as in the movement from "lissome knowledge" to "*The brown lines persist/In explicit sex*" (3). In the former, the interruption, whatever it is that was absent is apparently objectified in the image the poet makes of this moment: "What given, what gifts. The air/Stand straight up like a tail" (3). Repeatedly in Ashbery the invisible is made visible in the materials of the present moment or memory: "The pancake/Is around in idea" (5). Still, at the same time, Ashbery does not make such an imagist's move without some ironic detachment. While these images are clearly invested with some sense of phenomenological presence, this is so only in a disjunctive sense, as the images foreground their material absurdity rather than highlight a communicable intellectual/emotional complex. He clearly recognizes the limitations of such a response, and the isolated line which follows our first objectified image suggests a second, more visually arresting and self-critical image: "He spit on the flowers" (3). Ashbery will not allow himself to come to a simple resolution to what I have been calling the present absence of the moment.

Nevertheless, the distraction by the donkey and the connection made to sex (which suffered a rejection not unlike the aforementioned image: "Matters like these/No one can care about") allow Ashbery to shift his train of thought and to begin again on a more personal level:

Also for someone
Like me the time flows round again
With things I did in it.
I wish to keep my differences
And to retain my kinship
To the rest. That is why
I raise these flowers all around.
They do not stand for flowers or
Anything pretty they are
Code names for the silence. (3-4)

Here Ashbery places the previous experience explicitly in terms of one person's perspective and calls attention to temporal and material limitations. In this vein he translates the present absence into alienation from self and others. In these lines that which exceeds his knowledge is an understanding of his own experiences through time. Ashbery speaks to his desire for an embodiment of self which comes, presumably, from a reflection on these past experiences—the "differences" and "kinship" spoken of are certainly a distinction between self and 'others' and, perhaps, between present self and past selves.⁴ We might view the cultivation of "flowers" as similar to image-making of the first few

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stanzas and to poetry in general, which is a medium limited by its materiality in the sense that poems do not "stand" for themselves but are "code names for silence" (4). On the one hand, Ashbery hopes that by not standing for something these material disjunctions (these "flowers," these lines) will increase the emphasis on the quidditas of language (as "code names for [the] silence" of the moment); on the other hand, Ashbery anticipates the codification of his speculation, and, therefore, potential loss of insight.

So, Ashbery calls "this" (this poem, this sort of speculation) a "cloud/Mandate or trap" (3), or a "haze that casts/The milk of enchantment" (3)—this is, an attempt to name (in one place) what, because of time, won't stay put. And by naming it, describing it in this two-voiced way, he puts into play a generative tension stemming from the moment as it is speculated upon, the materials of representation, and the fact that "time flows round again" (3).

Ashbery states more clearly the limited value of this activity:

*Around us are signposts
Pointings to the past
The old-fashioned, pointed
Wooden kind. And nothing directs
To the present that is
About to happen. (3-4)*

Thus the poet has articulated for himself the problem as it exists in the present: his images, "flowers," clearly mark something of value from the past; they provide little help, however, in putting the present into perspective, and no guidance for the future: "There is still the same amount to do" (4). He acknowledges that they provided him with "A way of getting to see the world/At minimal cost and without/Risk" (4), and, also, that his task is to find a new way to get at the value of the present moment, one which retains some usefulness for the future.

Obviously, this will be a challenging endeavor:

*My way shall run from there
And not mind the pain
Of getting there. This is an outburst. (4)*

The obfuscation of "there" prevents any linear notion of progression, or a movement away from one thing to another, but there is a kind of movement all the same. As in the poem's opening stanza, we can understand this movement as a methodology which does not privilege one image over another (or one voice, or one philosophy, etc.) but which now firmly strives to resist rigid codification.

Ashbery's immediate response is to interrogate the process of

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image-making, of description, that "*made sense to/A few of us until it became/The end*" (4), in order to understand why the loss that comes with fixity occurs. He imagines the process as one of self-enclosure—"I wish to remain happily among these islands," and "*The fences are barrel staves/Surrounding, encroaching on/The pattern of the city*" (4)—in which the "formula" becomes an end in itself. It is almost as if these emblems, the "islands," the "city," would be enough if only we weren't made aware of the present absence, of their inadequacy: "The dust blows in./The disturbance is/Nonverbal communication"(4). This nagging reminder of what cannot be invested in our material fictions, once realized, fixes the emerging emblems until, like a "*ghost town*," they are abandoned.

The image of the "*ghost town*" provokes our feeling of dissatisfaction since that which we desire—embodied in the "disturbance" of "dust," and "*tumbleweed*"—is present but elusive, dominant but unknowable: The disturbance "rules ideas/Of what else may be there/Which regroup farther on/Standing around looking at/The hole left by the great implosion" (4–5). The image of the town, like the "signposts," or the image of the "air . . . straight up like a tail," is confronted with the present absence all around it, which, unlike the emblem itself, "persists" into the future, and as a result it "collapses into itself" (5). The collapse refers to both the fixed image and the disturbance (which, of course, is an image itself) since the disturbance of the moment is a continuous movement into the future, and in the sense that our emblematic images, divested of the significance that we give them, fold into themselves. Our attempts to make the present absence known in material form is bounded by its constructedness, or, as Ashbery phrases it: That which escapes us "*persists/In dumbness which isn't even/A negative articulation*" (5). Quite possibly here we have also a rebuke of the impossible selflessness argued for by Keats in his concept of 'negative capability.'⁵ If so, perhaps Ashbery has come to the realization that these musings are not purely objective, nor are they pure subjective representationalism. They might be arbitrary—in the sense that even Ashbery is unaware of the direction they will take—but they are still profoundly ideological, and yet limited in their potentiality to become profoundly fixed and thus abandoned by writer, thinker, reader, and critic.⁶

In short, Ashbery acknowledges he must respond to disturbances, "*any/Nameless event*" (4) that problematizes his naming and allows him to scatter and "regroup" (5). He watches "*strict identities*" (5) form around the disturbance, considers how "*a new alertness changes/Into the look of things/Placed on the railing/Of this terrace*" (5, my underlining), and suggests that such change is how "*a life/May be known and recognized/A shipwreck seen from the shore*" (6). In this movement

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Ashbery seems to shift his attention from image-making to the elimination of the image; a 'change' of "alertness" (5), he feels near to—on "this terrace"—and distant from—"seen from the shore/A puzzling column of figures" (6). Here is an acceptance that the present moment cannot be dealt with in isolation, an intuition that it is its very dissolution which will enable the poet to put the present moment into perspective.

By acknowledging, once again, the limitations of materiality and perspective, Ashbery is building into the poem a critique of whatever is to follow, a critique which functions not unlike the disturbances which undermine his images. We see this played out in the materialistic images (the "shirt," "house," and "luggage" [5-6]), and in the metaphysical abstractions ("The songs and sagas/The warp of knowledge" [5]) each of which is "Defiant of itself" (5). Ideally, this self-critique serves to approximate the 'unraveling' motion of the present absence and to acknowledge its continuance into the future:

*The beheld with all the potential
Of the visible, acting
To release itself
Into the known
Dust under
The sky. (5-6)*

Ashbery quickly realizes, though, that his 'deconstructive' poetry, which takes apart what it creates, will itself become "Formula/Now laundered, made to look/Transparent" (7). The poet cannot ignore the perspective of reader, critic, and even the poet's future self, all of whom will view the poet's present activity quite differently than he does now. No matter how he acts to avoid confusion, his poetry, his way of thinking, will be received as "casual, harsh" (7), as "mummified writing" (8), or, perhaps worst of all in its finality, as "pluralism" (9). Worse even than the limitations of the activity of image-making is the future perspective that glosses over the value of the present absence that exists in the moment of creation.

Despite the value he finds in the newness of the moment, in the embryonic "rubbery spirals" of dialectical materialism—"antithesis chirping/To antithesis" (8)—Ashbery remains frustrated by its future codification. While not giving up on his project, he is quite cynical about the process of identification, loss, and renewal:

*But as I see it you
Can only amble on, not free
Nor on a journey, appearing
Though at some later*

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*Juncture
Of our tepid and insidious
Greeting:
The shock of the path
Worn like this
Never scaled
Beyond a certain point
And returning and returning
Like a pole pointed to the sky. (7)*

That, at least, is how we reflect on our past, as a series of moments void of the eminence of the present. And this leads Ashbery to question the ideal rendering of a moment, "built into the fixed wall of water/That indicates where the present leaves off/And the past begins" (12), re-figuring it as, at best, "*an oblique arch through which sails/Perpendicular/The speeding hollow bullet of these times*" (12).

At this point in section I it has become obvious that we have been following the poet (part of the time) as he has been flipping through a scrapbook or photo album: "*There was another photograph/In that album. . .*" (10). We might find this significant for a couple of reasons. First, the kind of image-making and reflection that is involved in putting a scrapbook together is not unlike the activity of poetry. The poet's images, like the camera print, seem like "*choreographed intrusions*" (12)—at least upon reflection. Second, and probably more important, we should rethink our views on the codification of the present moment in light of the attractive, albeit disturbing, magnetism that these images, or picture, hold for the poet. Indeed, Ashbery grudgingly admits their ability to 'speak' to the present through their artificial construction: "Enough gets through to make the occasion/A glottal one full of success/And coated with the film of success" (10). A shutter functions very much like the 'glottis,' and here Ashbery is emphasizing the image as a speech act. "Film of success" most likely alludes to a recurring trope in Ashbery's poetry, that of "time [as] an emulsion" ("*Soonest Mended,*" Double 17). What is suggested here, as Richard Jackson states in his thorough study of Ashbery's "Nomadic Time," is a "present that is both dispersing and converging, and which implies a future in these motions; the sense that something of Time can be repeated, to at least counterpoint a sense of loss and passage . . ."⁷ This is not the same ambitious desire that he expressed earlier, to have the present "*never end, but exist/In the memory of itself turned to flesh*" (7), but as an accommodating response,⁸ it is much more attractive than the idea of losing the moment forever (an idea which he appeared to be heading toward).

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Important, too, is Ashbery's double-translation of the newly understood value that he places in these constructed images. As is typical of Ashbery, he appears both to celebrate the pictures despite their material limitations—"But we must not treasure/It less in the magnesium/Flare that is manna to all things/In the here and now" (11)—and, at the same time, to cringe at the construction that can make the past present: "*How repellent was the adumbration/That lodged us here*" (11), "*See there is only light/Nothing to live at*" (11). These lines nicely summarize the tension that Ashbery has struggled with in the first section of the poem. He has repeatedly articulated the present absence he finds in the moment, and in the moment reflected upon, as he speculates on the ways and means of successfully representing the moment in all of its discursiveness. Furthermore, his attitude toward the present absence of a moment has been somewhat ambivalent. At times he is very much attracted to its material form, while at others he is frustrated that he cannot manage the form it will take, and afraid that his constructions will become rigid and mock the moment that was once valued—thereby alienating the present self. This paradox hinges on, I think, whether or not the material present absence becomes something for alert fully conscious use for those in the present—as in the "manna of all things/In the here and now" (11)—or whether, like the "*signposts*," it becomes limited only to the past, say as nostalgia, or, even worse, becomes "*formula*," formulaic repetition, and is set aside. In this section, I think, Ashbery suggests that one way to ensure a poem's, or an image's, continuance into the future is to record not the moment but its unraveling, and in doing so to record the 'bullet' of time passing through.

In other words, the past has been repeatedly "sampled" (12), tested we might say, for its present value. Thus the problem of interpretation implicit in such an activity should be emphasized, or, more precisely, should not be separated from the material image itself. Ashbery, at times, desires that this should not be so; he asserts that material present absence "can only be taken as/Itself" (4). But to his credit Ashbery recognizes that criticism, or "*the academy*," has "performed/A useful function" (14), and it is this critical function (whether built into the poem itself or originating from the outside) that acknowledges the present and future utility of a recorded moment. In this sense, both author and critic must resist the temptation of too neat a framing of experience, or else: "*It emerges as a firm/Enigma, burnished, filled in*" (15). As Ashbery's own self-criticism proves, one must not allow one's assumptions to go unexamined. In the section's concluding lines, there

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is a longing for the 'innocence' of the present moment that is beyond self-critical reflection:

In a poem of harmonious dejection, but it was
 Only picture-making. Under
 The intimate light of the lantern
 One really felt rather than saw
 The thin, terrifying edges between things
 And their terrible cold breath.
 And no one longed for the great generalities
 These seemed to preclude. Each thought only
 Of his private silence, and hungered
 For the promised moment of rest. (16)

We have learned, however, that the "generalities" are not "precluded," and, in fact, seem necessary to "retain [one's] kinship/To the rest" (4). Also, by the end of section I we know that the "thin, terrifying edges between things" are not entirely lost in "picture-making." Furthermore, the poems of value to us in the future present are those which "bear witness/[to] The living getting trampled/Underfoot" (13-14); their "speculation/Raves and raves as on a mirror/To the outlandish accompaniment of [their] own death" (14); all of this work is "Woven on death's loom" (15) and is a way of (to return to the beginning of this section) appreciating 'the roundness' of time. As we give up the material replacement for the moment (the fixed image), we see the distance between people, moments, the moment and its version, and so on: all promising connection but never to be joined.

In my reading of section I, I have emphasized, and I suggest Ashbery does too, a type of reflection on the past. I have primarily detailed two kinds of responses Ashbery makes in this "testing": (1) The freezing of the moment, 'picture making,' which produces 'code names for silence.' (2) Meditation or reflection on past experiencing, including an interrogation of the moment in which, most likely, unraveling occurs. Moreover, there seems to be a certain distance, connoting something like control, between the poet and his subject matter in section I. This is perhaps best suggested in the image of an individual flipping through a photo album. Other metaphors also leap to mind. For example, we might view section I as a poem that reflects upon the poet's previous poems, or as a life experience that consists in the re-experiencing of the past distinguished by the self-conscious reflexivity that accompanies such speculation.⁹ In any case, the section's images and memories, its explicit subject matter, seem to be given, supplied by previous experiences, as if the activity that went into the

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picture-making occurred in the past. This distinction is worth making, I think, because then we can see Ashbery, in section I, trying to return to the process and product of the past through its present form—a task which generally leads to a kind of loosening up or unraveling of the moment and image (the problem in the present, simply put, is that “*The magic has left the Drawings*” [4]) in order to see, or intuit, that which subtends experience and that which makes experience living and ongoing.

In section II, I see Ashbery take aim at a movement into the future from the kind of speculation (the two types of responses) I have defined in section I. I see section II acting on, rather than reflecting upon, present absence; therefore, its tone is less meditative and pensive and more progressive and experimental. This shift in tone is evident from the section's opening lines:

I photographed all things,
All things as happening
As prelude, as prelude to the impatience
Of enormous summer nights opening
Out farther and farther, like the billowing
Of a parachute, with only that slit
Of starlight. (17)

Once again we are presented with a photograph, but this time it is not an object for reflection but rather a “prelude” to an activity where the emphasis is not so much on a ‘picture’ as on ‘photographing’—that is, photography as an activity in the present moment. David Bromwich, in his insightful essay, describes this motif as “the exposure of a self that is diminished by experience, pictured side by side with the concealment of a self that is untouchable by experience” (43). The figures associated with the first section, like those in a photograph, are “diminished by experience.” The figures of section II are engaged in “the concealment of a self,” the construction of a self in the present. We might say that the value of this “concealment,” like a poet’s ‘misunderstanding,’ is in its inclusion of the diversity and decenteredness of an individual in order to protect against the codification of any single perspective.

It might help to look at Ashbery’s appropriation of Millet’s “Gleaners” in order to get a better sense for section II’s shift in focus, for the activity of the present:

In the distance one could see oneself, drawn
On the air like one of Millet’s “Gleaners,” extracting
This or that from the vulgar stubble, with the roistering
Of harvesters long extinct, dead for the ear, and in the middle

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Distance, one's new approximation of oneself:
 A seated figure, neither imperious nor querulous,
 No longer invoking the riddle of the skies, of distance,
 Nor yet content with the propinquity
 Of strangers and admirers, all rapt
 In attitudes of fascination at your feet, waiting
 For the story to begin. (34-35)

Section I prepares for section II much as the 'gleaners' make way for the "new approximation of oneself" to begin a new telling of the "old, old/Wonderful story" (17). Situating the "seated figure" in the "middle/Distance" emphasizes the continuation of the spatializing project of the teller, and of the deconstructive and reconstructive projects of harvester and gleaner. In depicting them together, at once, we see a refusal to privilege either moment, which belies any necessity for "Litany's" section I to come before section II; in fact, these projects occur together and depend on the opposition of the other. What follows the "Gleaners" passage,

All right. Let's see—
 How about "The outlook wasn't brilliant
 for the Mudville nine that day"? No,
 That kind of stuff is too old-hat. Today
 More than ever readers are looking for
 Something upbeat, to sweep them off their feet. (35)

might be read as an experimental, tentative beginning to the 'new telling of the story'—resulting in a dead end in this case.

One way to understand section II's shift in sensibility is to consider that, in section I, Ashbery, is attempting to reinterpret the material products of his speculation—the "picture-making"—in order to celebrate their useful function to him in the present. Therefore he comes to know present absence through the enigmatic presence of the past preserved. Section II, however, works out of the illocality of the present. We might borrow from Jackson's description of the distinctive style of "Grand Gallop" in order to summarize the shift between the first two sections of "Litany": section II measures "not the absence of a past that must be supplemented, but a past so supplemented it has overtaken its own future, a past which pronounces itself everywhere" (164). The surplus of this illocality is both everywhere and nowhere, the 'pronouncement' emerging from an array of fragments and from the ruptures transforming them:

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Now that the things of autumn
 Have been sequestered too in
 their chain
 The other part of the year
 become
 Visible
 And the summer night is like
 a goldfish bowl
 With everything in full view,
 yet only parts
 Are what is actually seen, and
 these supply
 The rest. It's not like cheating
 Since it is all there, but more like
 Helping the truth along a little:
 The artifice lets it become itself,
 Nestling in truth.

*It cannot be found
 As when the whole sky shifts and stays
 Where it is until the next time.
 Like a summer job in a department
 store
 It stays on and on,
 Breaking up the moments, hiding
 The kissing,
 Taking whatever is there away from
 us.
 Its temperature is darkness,
 Its taste, the silent, bitter welcome
 On the edge of the forest
 When you were starting to reach home.*

(17)

Between the two columns we have a whole realized despite gaps in the "full view," and gaps realized despite a seamless transition from whole view to whole view—"As when the whole sky shifts and stays/Where it is until next time." We have a persisting awareness of presence in its material and abstract forms. Whereas in section I the "impatience" (17) one feels when "whatever is forgotten/Or stored away is imbued with vitality" (18) is troublesome, in section II this sensation functions as a generative force in the artistic creation of the present moment: "But now the now is what matters" (21), we are told.

But, as in section I, Ashbery is concerned with avoiding formulaic responses:

We are to become ashamed
 only much later,
 Much later on, under the
 long bench.

*Also, too much is written
 About it, as though each time
 Were starting from zero toward an
 imaginary
 Number. No one sees it's
 Just the evening news, mostly,
 A translation into the light of day,
 Or two fiddles scraping along
 Out of kindness, you think, but
 To whom? In short, any kind of tame
 Manifestation against the straw*

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And it is not like the old days
When we used to sing off-key
For hours in the rain-drenched
schoolroom.

On purpose. Here, whatever is
forgotten
Or stored away is imbued with
vitality.

Whatever is to come is too.

*Of darkness and the darkening
trees
Until the aftertaste claimed it.*

(17-18)

In these lines Ashbery has described two types of moves that have been available to him in the face of present surplus; both, I think, we have seen before in the responses in section I. The "translation" or "manifestation" of formlessness "*into the light of day*" (produced, for example, by "two fiddles scraping along") detail a Stevens-like 'metaphysician in the dark' and a type of image-making not unlike section I, in which "*the aftertaste claimed it.*"¹⁰ He also describes a somewhat unsophisticated postmodern babbling, the "sing[ing] off-key/ For hours in the rain-drenched schoolroom/On purpose," which takes the unraveling produced from his self-conscious speculations in the first section and 'plays' it out endlessly, as would a droll Whitman parodist. Obviously, coming out of section I, neither of these moves will seem attractive to the poet; rather, both seem tired and conventional.

At the same time Ashbery recognizes the efficacy of these sensibilities (which might be figured as either postmodern/modern or romantic/modern, depending on how we read the two columns quoted above) if not approached as formula ("*starting from zero toward an imaginary/Number*"), if one is not predetermining his/her own ends and means:

How can I explain?

No matter how raffish
The new clients moving slowly along,
Taking in the sights, placing bets,
There comes a time when the moment
Is full of, knows only itself.
Like a moment when a tree
Is seen to tower above everything else,
To know itself, and to know everything else
As well, but only in terms of itself
Without knowing or having a clear concept
Of itself. This is a moment
Of fast growing, of compounding myths
As fast as they can be thrown off,

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Trampled under, forgotten. The moment
 Not made of itself or any other
 Substance we know of, reflecting
 Only itself. Then there are two moments,
 How can I explain? (18)

Here again, together, are the moments of knowing and not knowing self and other, which depend on the opposition of perspectives (rather than the "compounding myths" themselves) for their vitality. As in Ashbery's rendition of "Gleaners," the poet is attempting to realize the nearness and alienation of the moment at once, to combine living and reflection in the present moment. No wonder the "substance" of the present folds into itself and is replaced by the radiance of the competing perspectives of past (knowing) and future (not knowing). A focal question of this section, then, asks how does one write about this locality that is illocality; how does one recognize and act on the poignancy one felt and saw in the present absence of section I; how does one chart this invisible presence in the present moment?¹¹ Ashbery playfully creates images to describe this project: "A *plumb line erected straight into the air*" (18) (which recalls the "air . . . straight up like a tail" [3]), and as a bizarre connection with a "creature" in the midst of a "storm" in which both are "blind," and, therefore, the encounter is remembered only for its "strange woody aftertaste" (19). Of course, we know enough at this point in Ashbery's meditation not to substitute these images for the moment in itself.

Quite directly, Ashbery shows us that one of the ways to get at the "inaudible repercussions" (19), at the "single thing that [is] out of sight" (20), that is, one of the ways to go about "intuiting cataclysms of light" (19), is to look for 'gaps': "*The wisest among us/Collect gaps*" (19). It follows that we can interpret his cataloguing on the same page (the itemized description of the "*shops*" [19]) as a way of getting a peripheral view of what is not there, or of what is guiding his perceptions but he cannot see, in the very act of describing what is there. But unlike the glib chatter of those "off-key" (18) singers, here the poet puts into play the tension between the moment and its version, between self and other:

*. . . used government documents and stacks
 Of cans of brine shrimp, and an
 Extremely elegant saleslady, in
 Printed chiffon, seeming to be from a different
 World entirely. But that's—que voulez-vous?—
 Par for the course, I guess. You
 Pick up certain things here, where*

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*You need them, and
Do without the others for the moment,
Essential though they may be.
Every collection is as notable for its gaps
As for what's there. (19)*

This anticlimactic encounter at an offbeat junkshop (the everyday version of meeting with the "creature" [19] is played out until gaps are exposed (as we noticed previously with the indiscernible shifts of sky [17]) or, alternatively, gaps are filled in (noticed previously in the "parts" of "summer night" filled in [17])). In this case, the original gap—the poet's perplexity: "*It's even hard to tell exactly what/They're [the shop] selling*" (18)—is 'filled in' by the inventorying of the store; but this only leads to a new gap: the 'otherworldly' saleslady. Ashbery quickly abandons the "*saleslady*," to shift his attention to a meditation on gaps themselves. For it is the 'gaps' that are important (not the junk shop) or, rather, it is the speculative jumping, from gap to gap, that is of interest. That is to say, Ashbery pushes connections and disconnections until the surface material of the poem, the images and experiences, are pushed to their limits or are ruptured, like his image of the "glassblower's" pushing of "a moment he knows is coming" (20).

And, again, in doing so, Ashbery hopes to distinguish the material substance of the present moment against his own perceptions and against the 'bullet' of time passing through, in order to trace how these inform each other—like the figures in "Gleaners." The 'collector of gaps' recognizes that in any recorded moment "*the plunge, the surge of the tide/Drowns the memory of it*" (19); and, therefore, stands in opposition to "some people" who take "*familiar sticks and pieces*" and call it "*The collection*" (19), as if one could "*take something out of life/And then put it back, knowingly, beside/Its double, from whom/The original tensions unwittingly came*" (20). Ashbery comes to a similar understanding in the title poem of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (SP), in which the distance between the moment and its versions is reflected in an image that "protect(s)/What it advertises"):

*As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. (SP 68)*

Of course in "Litany," Ashbery's attention is more fragmented and less focused than in "Self-Portrait"—in the sense that he doesn't keep returning to a single object of reflection, such as Parmigianino's painting. Still, all the shifts of attention I have been detailing in these

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pages are a type of "swerving easily away" to deny any linearity of perspective, any fixed, and thus limited, whole view. Instead, we see a variety of interstices and the flow among them, constantly threatening to transform the moment in its material, temporal, and conjectural forms.

The several perspectives that are interlaced in the sensibility refuse to reduce the subject (of the poem, of our understanding) either to an experience as it is portrayed or as it is reflected upon. For example, when Ashbery discusses "allusion," he is talking of a moment infused with past, present, and future:

Only the frozen emphasis
On a single thing that was out of sight
When the allusion was made, remains. (20)

One way I keep my footing in Ashbery is to realize the three manifestations of time at work in his poetry. So, reflecting on these three lines, we can see how the present is always misinformed, the "allusion" of the present always groping after what is only remembered of the past (and not necessarily consciously), which implies its movement into the future when its "frozen emphasis" (the "allusion" [illusion] of the present defined by the past) is dealt with critically in the future present, presumably as new allusions are made. Thus, for me, the type of reflection I see in this poem does not define the present moment so much as chart its construction from the past and movement into the future. The pushing on, or rupture of, the present moment is a recognition of yesterday in today and an awareness of its continuation into the future, without foreseeing the future. Moreover, the living present knows itself fully only in a (mis)recognition of the past and future; in fact, it is this same skewed, (mis)informed perception which ensures our participation (or lays the foundation for human agency) in the flux of time. In other words, our misperception of the present (which is based on the past) informs our future, which will, likewise, be misunderstood and guarantee our sense of perpetuation in time:

It's going to be different in the future
But now the now is what matters,
Knowing itself old, and open to vengeance,
And, in short, up to nobody's expectations
For it, as dank and empty
As an old Chevy parked under the trees
Amid dead leaves and dogshit, everybody's
Idea of what is coming true for them
• Which is now burning in lava-like letters

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In the sky, a piece of good news
 If you agree that good news is what
 Is happening at this very instant. (21)

In Ashbery, the difference between an allusion that serves as a burning-bush-like visionary moment ("lava-like letters/In the sky") or as an image disparaged and abandoned ("an old Chevy parked under the trees/Amid dead leaves and dogshit") is one of perspective in place and time.¹² Of course, preferable to either in isolation is a recognition of both, as is suggested by the inclusive passage above and, earlier, in the description of "October" as the time "when things change over" (20):

There is no longer time for a line
 Or rather there are no lines in the time
 Of ripeness that is past,
 Yet still pausing on the ridge
 Stealing into permanence. (20-21)

The "lines in the time," the demarcation of the "ridge," are not believed in, yet there is expectancy all the same of continuation into the future ("Stealing into permanence"), in addition to distance and difference. As Ashbery states, in *Three Poems*, "there is always something fading out or just coming into focus"¹³ (79).

The irony here is that, as critics of Ashbery, we are constantly basing the progression of thought we see in a poem like "Litany" on a series of images and actions which come before, in preceding pages; and our connection we may feel with our summary of a particular passage is generally frustrated ('going out of focus'), if not broken, as we turn the page. As I move through an Ashbery poem, I am constantly faced with a need to reevaluate a fresh assertion in the context of the following page. Of course, this is in part due to my desire for the comfort and linearity of a particular kind of coherence, yet I see this same desire wished for and challenged in the poetry of John Ashbery. Like Ashbery, critics should alertly use the distortion of medium that is intentional, as well as inevitable. Ashbery foregrounds this distortion in the discourse between the two columns; the 'marks' in time they represent are implicated through, and subordinated by, language. That is, the poet's experiences are glossed—(mis)recognized—in the reflexivity and deferment of the writing process. Poet and reader are invited, at the site of the text, to consider what produces and proceeds from any notion of subject. Part of the challenge for critics, then, is to realize how moments of connection and/or drifting are determined by and for the past and future crystallized at any moment in the 'radiance' of present absence. The sophisticated and unsophisticated portrayals of Ashbery's

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work as similar to reading an argument where one is 'not sure of its foundation' ignore the need to chart anyway its coming into and going out of existence in the present moment.¹⁴

In this vein I have tried to trace, in the preceding pages, some of the antecedents to the type of meditation I see in section II, and have followed their regeneration in the ensuing pages of section II. In particular, I followed the trope of 'the gap,' or 'present absence,' through a narrow plot line beginning with the section's opening images of photography (17), up to the juxtaposition of the "old Chevy" and "lava-like letters" (21). This is, obviously, a rather short foray into the body of section II. But I think the section continues, essentially, to repeat this working out of the moment(s) as it is (they are) lived and interrogated—indeed, their parallelism helped me to set the rhythms for my reading of these early scenes.¹⁵ We can recognize forces such as time, thought, materiality, and 'other' all at work, whether we are confronted with a speculation that leads to a blank page (29–31); a discussion of the Brass and Silver Ages (31–33); a stringing together of radiant memories and character sketches (22, 24–26; 53–55); any combination of a bewildering series of equivalents, including "A sunken Parnassus" and "*cartoon animals*" (28–31), a discussion of poetry (44–46); rhyme play (51–53); the recurring metaphors of the "old, old story," of "Grace and linearity," of the "lesson of the cloth," of "landscape" (obviously the outline of section II is not so neat). As Ashbery tells us, all this is not simply for the sake of deconstructive play, but in order to go beyond "the range/Of simple perception" and enter into "*new chapter[s]*" (57), so that, for example, one becomes vitally a part of time, rather than a subject of time. That is, in the act of charting one's movement in a succession of moments, one becomes, according to one's (mis)perceptions, an active agent in time's flux.

And it is in section III of "Litany" where the self in relation to time is most directly treated. In doing so, Ashbery is returning to the poem's opening lines: "... for someone/Like me time flows round again/With the things I did in it" (3), and returning to the problem that emerged from this observation: "I wish to keep my differences/And to maintain my kinship/To the rest" (3–4). At this point in "Litany," after having demonstrated the motion of these lines, Ashbery now re-addresses this problem with the question, "But, what is time, anyway?" (58). I would emphasize, however, that this is not a return to the enunciating self of section I. Although it seems, at times, as if Ashbery, especially in his long poems, concludes with a return to his beginnings—for example, in *Three Poems*, when the final section, "The Recital," begins with: "All

right. The problem is that there is no new problem" (107)—I think it is more accurate to see the poet's persona entering each new section as the "new approximation of one's self" from "Gleaners." Rather than view Ashbery's poems as circular in nature, we might view their motion as one of a gyre spiraling around as a mark that is never quite repeated; or, perhaps, as two spirals centered upon the same empty space  on which we move back and forth around the gyres as the circuit is never closed, and the mark always changed as it leaps the gap.¹⁶

In this section, Ashbery suggests that this kind of return and change is like returning again to life as a single person after 'ending' a relationship:

*But I want him here.
Something is changed without him,
Something we will go on understanding
Until he returns to us. (58)*

The anxiety in these lines, the desire for "him" (whether he is a lover or past self), speaks of a recognition that the return to his old self is impossible, and that reconciliation can never simply take place—the persona is "changed" and a 'new telling' must begin. That is the irony of this return: it only necessitates a new beginning:

*... gradually leads us, each of us,
Back to the fragment of sense which is the place
We started out from. Isn't it strange
That this was home all along, and none of us
Knew it? What could our voyages
Have been like, that we forgot them so soon,
What galleons, what freighters were made to appear
And as sullenly to vanish in the thick foam bearing
Down from the horizon? What kind of a school
Is this, that they teach you these things,
And neglect whatever was important, that we were made to
feel
Around for and so lost our names
and our dogs and were coming back, back
Into the commotion under the waterwheels
So that everything is spinning now, bears
Very little resemblance to what was supposed to be the
entrance to the port, but is now
Whittled away to almost nothing? (63)*

Although he returns "home" again, home (also figured as "the fragment of sense") is changed, "Whittled away to almost nothing" by the "voyages" themselves. Ashbery's poems, and "litany" in particular, diagram this return to a new beginning where one is made to "feel" for one's 'lost

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name.' The meditation of the columns themselves highlights this return, this movement between past and present selves.

The tension in this last section comes out of the poet's attitudes toward the change he undergoes in the gyring motion of time. At some stages he feels alienated by time's flux, as if his activity had nothing to do with its progression, nothing to do with his change:

So that it is I who have aged without
Having done anything, certainly nothing
To deserve it, like a lost cause. (59-60)

Such frustration leads to a wish to be outside of time, in the sense that one gives oneself over completely as time's subject, or, in this case, as someone else's ward:

All I want
Is for someone to take care of me,
I have no other thought in mind,
Have never entertained any.
When that day comes I'll go gladly
Into whatever situation or room you want me in
To take care of.
And meanwhile I'll wait, obligingly, full
Of manna and joy, for that to take place
Which it will, soon. (60)

Yet on other occasions the poet affirms his project despite its inherent limitations:

... but whether what
Is lasting in your work will last is the
Big question: it's poetry, it's extraordinary,
It makes a great deal of sense. It starts out
With some notion and switches to both, yet
The object will be partially perceived by the forms
Around it it is responsible for. (63)

The "object," perhaps the 'object of contemplation,' is in some sense lost in the "switching" from "notion" to itself (as we have seen in "Litany's" 'swerving' to and in gaps) but some sense of 'it' is "partially perceived by the forms/Around it it is responsible for." As in our discussion of "allusion," where we traced how the past informed the present and future, here the object can be perceived in the gaps between it and the "forms . . . it is responsible for." We have seen in the preceding pages that there is a sense of losing the moment as it is put into words (indeed, Ashbery's desire is to know this for himself) but, out of this loss, Ashbery confronts form, and his anxiety about form, which leads to 'new' renditions of the forever lost moment as it is reflected upon.

JOHN ASHBERY'S "LITANY"

In fact, it is that space between "notion" and "object" that is the poem's concern; it is in this space that the poet himself is lost and re-inscribed (in relation to form, object, and notion):

... over and over, like a
Wave on a beach, that thinks it's had this
Tremendous idea, coming to crash on the beach
Like that, and it's true, it has, yet
Others have gone before, and still others will
Follow, and far from undermining the spiciness
Of this individual act, this knowledge plants
A seed of eternal endeavor for fear of
Happening just once. . . . (66)

In the belief in, and acting on, the "tremendous idea" that is affirmed in this section, and in the recognition of "others [who] have gone before, and still others [who] will/Follow," one becomes an active historical agent in an "eternal endeavor," even if, as the lines which follow go on to warn us, our "vision" drowns in the "drain/That absorbs, night and day, all our equations," as part of the "divine riddle which is aging" (66). As we noted earlier, the misrecognition of the present moment is inevitable—even desirable if it is believed in anyway—in order for one to go on charting (and, therefore, in some sense directing, as to a "port") the perpetual notion of time's present moment. Or, as Ashbery figures this condition:

... The ocean too
Is someone's idea. The pleasant banter of
The elements cannot disguise this basically
Thin concept, nor remove us from
Contemplation of it, and that is the best
Answer that may precede the question. (67)

The question, we can infer, asks, 'How does one proceed in this type of "Contemplation"—the object of which is always substituted with an "idea" and so always misperceived—and what does one achieve?' The meditation of "Litany," with its 'vitiation' of form and content (62) abstracted from temporal context, nullifies such a question, "as any magic/Is the right kind at the right time" (67), and is determined, anyway, by the materials of the moment at hand.

For Ashbery, then, one can discern one's coming in and out of time through a history pregnant with doubleness. Like the "liturgical sense of history" (63) that runs through this last section, which is married to a people whose "Destiny is always to be of two minds," who slide again and again between Christ and Barabbas, the poet's meditation comes round again to realize his words have "fled like arrows/From the taut

string of a restrained/Consciousness" (68)—words that he knew would miss their mark—and to commemorate the misrecognition which is responsible for their sustenance in the present, responsible for what is lost and forgotten and what will come to be. The poet's misrecognition of their past predicates their future forms and maintains his self-conscious continuation in the gyre of time.

NOTES

¹ Reference is to *Reported Sightings*, hereafter cited as *RS*.

² In his conversation with Stitt, Ashbery addresses the problems "Litany" poses for critics: "I intended, in 'Litany,' to write something so utterly discursive that it would be beyond criticism . . . because this would somehow exemplify the fullness, or, if you wish, the emptiness, of life, or, at any rate, its dimensionless quality. . . . The poem is of immense length, and there is a lack of coherence between the parts. Given all this, I don't really see how one could deal critically with the poem, so I suppose it is necessary for the critic to draw up certain guidelines before beginning" (47).

Lest we throw up our hands and put the book aside, Ashbery goes on to say that his poems "have their own form," and that "there is always a resolution in [his] poems." Should we expect anything other than this kind of ironic doubletalk from the creator of "Litany"? For me, this irony is the whole point of Ashbery. The sheer materiality of the language of many of Ashbery's poems precludes any communicable "message"—in the sense that the weight of the poems' verbiage, reverberating between the two columns, tends to disrupt any linear progression of logic, instead emphasizing the functional relationship of signifiers, which never seem to stand solely for themselves (as signifiers in a continuous relationship to one another on the paradigmatic axis of language), nor stand solely in an analogous relationship (as in the discontinuous functioning of signifiers on the syntagmatic axis). And yet, we still may find something fruitful in the movement or kind of speculation in a poem, and may get a sense of the kind of experience out of which it was produced. Then as we consider what all this implies, we must acknowledge our own act of construction that may be similar to and different from that which went on in the poetry.

³ I am thinking here of the generally accepted notion that we must, to a certain extent, construct the 'plot' of "Litany" for ourselves. Kaja Silverman provides us with a way of talking about this activity (195–200). Relating the term primarily to film theory, Silverman discusses "suture" in terms of the creation of a subject position for ourselves (as viewers and readers) in the film/text. The irreducible binary of Ashbery's 'two' voices, along with 'their' discursiveness, resists any attempt by the reader to create a fixed subject position, and therefore resists suture, or, instead, provides for a more fragmented and mobile form of suture. By not presenting the reader with a predetermined subject position, this kind of text forces the reader to acknowledge his/her arbitrary distinctions—which are, of course, never arbitrary, but a result of a complex web of socio-political forces.

⁴ The splintering of self, first articulated in this passage and developed

throughout the poem, can be thought of in terms of Roland Barthes' opening up of the "enunciatory abyss." In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith considers the representation of oneself, specifically in autobiography, and the way in which Barthes inserts a third 'I' between the enunciating 'I' and the enunciated 'Me,' the third 'I' being the "ideological subject" (100–05). Later, in his appropriation of contemporary feminist theory, Smith asserts that this third 'I' can take on the editing function of human agency (149). Ashbery builds this notion of splintered selves into "Litany." His self-criticism, his acknowledgement of temporal and material limitations serve this purpose. For a somewhat concrete representation of this "splintering" see "Litany," section II (34–35). As he places himself in the portrait by Millet ("Gleaners") Ashbery constructs a dramatic scene where this critical 'I' watches the enunciating self "extracting/This or that from the vulgar stubble" and envisions the enunciated me: "one's new approximation of oneself." I consider this in more detail in my discussion of section II.

⁵ Keats felt that he must not allow his 'ego' to interfere with his sensations. He believed that through negative capability his observations could exist outside of systematic philosophies and personal opinion, and, therefore, reach a pure state of objectivity. Of course, in Ashbery, his 'ego' constantly interferes with his sensations, his content, and his form.

⁶ For a parallel discussion see David Carroll (88–110). Carroll makes a detailed argument that any "observation is governed by ideology." Also related is Carroll's appropriation of Lukacs's irony: in which irony is "the trope which points to its own illusory nature, to the nonorganic, fictional, or artificial aspects of form. Irony does not resolve the conflicts and heterogeneity of the novel—at least not initially—but rather maintains and reasserts them" (96). "Litany"'s undermining both of aesthetic images and of stream-of-conscious representation functions in much the same way as 'it' foregrounds how meaning and perspective are (de)constructed.

⁷ See Jackson 141–86. The context for which I use this quotation (145) does not come from Jackson's essay. Jackson traces the question of time throughout the body of Ashbery's poetry. For Jackson, time is realized in the deconstruction of Ashbery's language, "time becomes language" in the "metonymic sliding" of Ashbery's signifiers.

⁸ T. S. Eliot comes to a similar compromise in the *Four Quarters*:

Time past and time future
 Allow but a little consciousness.
 To be conscious is not to be in time
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the harbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time time is conquered. (178)

In Ashbery, however, time is never 'conquered,' nor does our involvement with 'past and future' take place without loss.

⁹ Bromwich sees a similar type of reflection in Ashbery's short piece "Summer": "The shadow, which enters the poem soon after, evidently belongs to the world outside, with its mindless and unconsidering energies. It depletes,

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and itself causes the thinning-out phase that is another name for dying. We are told that its effect is indeed to blot out every lingering impression from the 'period of reflection' that has come before. This, then, is the power that the poet sets himself against. The aim of his poem is to induce a second period of reflection" (45).

¹⁰ In my reference to Stevens I am referring in particular to his "Of Modern Poetry," in which he suggests a poem is expressed:

In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise. (240)

¹¹ In his interview with Peter Stitt, Ashbery makes this suggestion: "I once half-jokingly said that my object was to direct the reader's attention to the white space between the columns" (50).

¹² For a similar discussion see *Three Poems* (71-80), Ashbery's discussion of "frontal" and "latent" thinking.

¹³ Ashbery uses almost the exact words to describe artist Anne Dunn in *Reported Sightings* and, significantly, he connects this discussion with poetic expression: "[Her] drawings appear to be constantly coming into or going out of focus, and to be intending this movement as the only truthful way of capturing, in a fixed medium, this way of happening. To quote Wallace Stevens: 'A mountainous music always seemed/To be falling and to be passing away'" (168).

¹⁴ For me this experience is analogous to locating the arc in between the images of Ezra Pound's "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/Petals on a wet, black bough"—the arc which keeps his pictures shifting and fluid ("In a Station of the Metro" 35).

¹⁵ In his interview with Stitt, Ashbery answers a question about the "paradox concerning ambiguity and certitude" in a way that suggests the kind of continued meditation on the moment that I am suggesting goes on in section II: "We might realize that the present moment may be one of an eternal or sempiternal series of moments, all of which will resemble it because, in some ways, they are the present, and won't in other ways, because the present will be the past by that time" (46).

¹⁶ I borrow the generative metaphor of the 'gyre' from Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. To give a sense of its implications, I quote a passage about the downfall of one of its characters: "Her souls had shrunk away and unmade themselves. That is the danger of going backward in the way she had done when she took back her child-name. She had not gyred, but had closed the circle. She was like the sticks of a fire put out by the rain" (388).

Behind this, of course, lies Yeats's gyre as a trope for language's ability to conceive order from disorder, union from opposites. In contrast, both Ashbery and Le Guin, in their own way, attend to the gap that is opened up in the gyre, expanding on the tensions between structure and chaos, tensions Yeats desires to overcome. While the modernist Yeats shrinks from the "widening gyre" (where "things fall apart" and "the center cannot hold") and yearns for "the

Second Coming" (the "closed circle"), Ashbery and Le Guin are open to the interstices that keep alive the otherness of experience in order to cultivate that which is living, mysterious, and ongoing.

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The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art

MARILYN MAY LOMBARDI

In 1937, when Elizabeth Bishop was twenty-six, she discovered the wilds of Florida on a fishing expedition and fell in love with the swamps and palm forests of a state that was still a North American wilderness. When she and her friend Louise Crane came to live in Key West the following year, however, their response to the tropical *Cayo Hueso*, known as the Bone Key, was severely colored by the tragic six-month stay in Europe that intervened between Bishop's first ecstatic visit to Florida and her return.¹ Bishop and her close friends, Crane and Margaret Miller, had been traveling from Burgundy back to Paris when their car was forced off the road and flipped over. Miller, a painter, was the only one seriously injured. Her arm, partially cut from her body when she was thrown clear of the car, eventually had to be amputated to the elbow.

If we look at Bishop's life and work during her time in Florida, we find that her imagination is haunted by the maiming of her intimate friend and fellow artist. The tragedy brought into terrible focus preoccupations already troubling the young poet—chief among them the artist's relationship to her own body, to its passions and its vulnerabilities. In one of a series of notebooks that she kept during her years in Key West, Bishop describes the automobile accident: "the arm lay outstretched in the soft brown grass at the side of the road and spoke quietly to itself, 'Oh my poor body! Oh my poor body! I cannot bear to give you up,'" but the detached limb's desire to be quickly reunited with its body soon gives way to other thoughts, "so this is what it means to be really 'alone in the world!'"² Bishop clearly identifies with the lonely arm—the analytic arm of the artist detached from the

woman and from the sensual memories that a woman's body retains. Like the acutely conscious arm speaking to itself by the side of the road, Bishop is terribly drawn to and yet alienated from the unconscious life of her own body, which she comes to view with a mixture of fascination, embarrassment, and pity (KW 2:12).

During the years in Florida, Bishop suffers from almost nightly attacks of debilitating asthma, and records her dreams and anxieties in the small notebooks that have only recently been made available to scholars. In the seclusion of these private journals, she turns with uncharacteristic forthrightness to the subject of flesh, its pleasures and its torments. She jots down plans to develop plays and poems about the bodily afflictions of Job, Jonah, St. Teresa, and St. Anthony, and appears especially preoccupied, for very personal reasons, with the fate of St. Sebastian. Repeatedly referred to in the Key West journals, he figures prominently again in an unfinished essay entitled *A Little About Brazil*, where the poet explains her fascination with him: "St Sebastian protects Rio de Janeiro and perhaps that is the reason why the people are all crazy about hypodermic injections." Bishop, an asthmatic forced to inject herself with cortisone, sees Sebastian's martyrdom as a reminder of her own intimate relationship with the hypodermic needle.

The poet's asthma and allergic inflammations—her most chronic physical ailments—are the primary focus of her lengthy letters to her New York doctor during the years in Key West. Bishop's personal physician, Dr. Anny Baumann, a friend as well as medical advisor, helps the poet trace the tangled relations that exist in her life between psychosomatic illness and early maternal deprivation. Bishop's private correspondence and notebook entries reveal that the poet's early, ambivalent experience of mother love continued to haunt her adult sexual relationships—and influence her view of the ambiguous bond between poet and reader.

Bishop's published work rarely speaks about her illness directly. In her poetry she refuses to allow herself, her body, and her experience to be contained within any culturally prescribed notion of gender or sexual orientation. She chooses, instead, to cloak and re-cloak her own flesh, to cross-dress, displace, or otherwise project her most intense feelings into a variety of poetic protagonists in order to escape stifling categorization and conventional definitions of identity. Still, Bishop's imagination continually pursues the implications of her private battle for breath. As a poet she transmutes the symptoms of her asthmatic condition into a rich cache of metaphors that help enact her sense of the world: for Bishop, human interaction takes place within a set of

smothering categories (a series of waiting rooms, if you will) that enforce a kind of artificial intimacy among their occupants—an intimacy that often fails to respect the uniqueness and the privacy of each human soul.³ While asthma is not the central subject of poems like “In the Waiting Room,” “O Breath,” and “The Riverman,” knowledge of Bishop’s condition opens up new ways for the reader to approach crucial images of respiration, suffocation, and constriction in each work—images that draw attention to the equivocal reality of human relationships.

For much of Bishop’s life her body registered emotional distress in painful ways. The poet’s disabling allergic inflammations were largely responsible for perhaps the most important personal and professional decision of her life—to remain as a permanent resident in Brazil. While visiting friends in Rio de Janeiro, Bishop ate the fruit of the cashew and experienced a violent allergic reaction that left her head and ears swollen. After she recovered, she decided to stay in Brazil. In a series of letters to Baumann from her new home, near Petrópolis, she describes the onset of her affliction and her distended body: “That night my eyes starting stinging, and the next day I started to swell—and swell and swell, I didn’t know one *could* swell so much” (January 8, 1952).

Taking 15 ccs of calcium and 7 or 8 ccs of adrenalin in the vein each day to bring her swelling down, Bishop was suffering simultaneously from a “very bad” recurrence of her childhood eczema, an inflammatory condition of the skin characterized by oozing lesions which become scaly, crusted, or hardened: “Before this started,” she writes her doctor, “I had noticed my mouth got sore from eating, I thought, too much pineapple.” With the worse case of eczema since childhood, her “ears [swollen] like large red hot mushrooms,” and her asthma as bad as ever, Bishop writes to Baumann with frustration and a hint of justifiable self-pity: “I finally got sick of being stuck with so many things [to reduce the swelling, and felt] like St. Sebastian” (January 8, 1952). She proved allergic to the new “wonder drug,” penicillin, and her infected skin glands formed localized inflammations, or “boils.” Writing about the episode to her favorite relative, Aunt Grace, she remarks, “when someone is allergic like me, you never know what may happen, apparently” (July 16, 1956). Even when she was singing the praises of cortisone, an anti-inflammatory drug that left her in a state of “euphoria” and heightened creativity, she worried about still another form of swelling: “It’s amazing how energetic it makes one feel although also I’m afraid it has a tendency to make one get even fatter”

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(letter to Baumann from Samambaia, December 28, 1952). Weight gain had been a worry for many years; she had been taking two grains a day of thyroid pills to control her weight while in Washington, D.C., in 1949: "If I don't, I just keep getting fat no matter what I eat" (letter to Baumann, December 12). Like a latter-day St. Teresa, whose *Way of Perfection* became a permanent part of Bishop's private library, she tests her own strength by a "fastidious" disciplining of her wayward, expanding flesh (KW 2:23).

Of all her inflammatory reactions, however, bronchial asthma was the most chronic. Asthma is an allergic response to foreign substances that generally enter the body by way of the air breathed or the food eaten. In response to these substances the mucous membranes of the respiratory system secrete excessive amounts of mucus, and the smaller bronchial muscles go into spasms. This narrows the passageways, making it difficult to expel air. Bishop's wheezing lungs prevented her from taking up a comfortable and lasting residence in the places she loved, contributing to an already intense feeling of homelessness. To Baumann she confides that asthma has become the single most frustrating impediment to her happiness—"as soon as I get to a place I like best of all it starts again," she writes from Key West on December 30, 1948. Earlier that year (August 5), she writes to Baumann from Stonington, Maine, where her asthma and a variety of other acute allergic reactions make it impossible for her to sleep, and the almost hourly injections of adrenalin she takes to regulate her breathing leave her nauseated and dizzy: "For the past eight or nine years I have had asthma about every day and night." Awarded the first Lucy Martin Donnelly Fellowship from Bryn Mawr College in 1951, Bishop finds by February of 1952 that the "bounty [from the fellowship] has gone mostly for adrenalin."

The period covered by the Key West Notebooks became a time of psychological investigation for Bishop, who desperately needed to know the cause of her physical misery. Her remarks to Baumann make it clear that she had come to regard her doctor as a psychiatric advisor. From Stonington she writes Baumann that she is concerned with the state of her mind and its impact on her physical condition: "Every magazine or paper I pick up has an article proving that asthma is psychosomatic, everyone now thinks it is almost entirely, if not entirely mental" (August 5, 1948). In a letter to Baumann from Yaddo dated January 17, 1951, she describes bouts with asthma that leave her emotionally as well as physically exhausted, and she traces her "discouragement, panic, sleeplessness, nightmares" to the realization that she is "exactly the age

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now at which [her] father died." Her body's seemingly uncontrollable inflammations accorded somehow with what Bishop calls, in another letter to Baumann, her "morbid swellings of the conscience"—painful anxieties rooted in childhood sadness that rise up unpredictably to overwhelm her, like bad dreams. In her notebook she records these "dreams that overpowered [her]/("mugging") from behind" (KW 2:141). Just above these observations she scribbles three phrases in quick succession: "the fierce odors," "family mortality," "families of mortalities."

The central conditions of Bishop's childhood, her early orphaning and sense of maternal deprivation, left her with an acute sensitivity to the ways in which personal anguish and shame may be hidden from view. Her family corseted their emotions in a futile attempt to tame the brute world of pain and raise themselves out of lassitude. The effort drove them into a den of artificial innocence. Early on she was initiated into strategies of evasion and indirection and a "Puritan outlook" with respect to the body and its "embarrassing" weaknesses that accompanied her on her travels and became the burdensome "inheritance" she carried with her to Brazil—an inheritance that set her apart from that country's more "tolerant" natives (letter to Baumann from Rio de Janeiro, July 7, 1954).⁴ Bishop considers herself physically allergic to the atmosphere in which she was raised, the "hypocrisy [that was] so common then, so unrecognized, that it fooled everyone, including" the hypocrite himself ("Memories of Uncle Neddy, *CProse* 230⁵). Hypocrisy reminds her of the molds and mildews that made her life so miserable; like the hypocrite, the "gray-green dust" is double in nature, suggesting blooming life and its sooty shadow, "morbidly"—"or perhaps mortality is a better word." In her private notebooks she would call this hypocrisy the "fierce odors" of "family mortality" that surrounded her earliest years.⁶

Though she suffered from bronchitis in the first years of her life in her maternal grandparents' home in Nova Scotia, the condition became much worse when her mother succumbed to insanity and was permanently hospitalized. Bishop was only five years old. Her paternal grandparents took the girl ("unconsulted and against my wishes," as she later put it) to Worcester, Massachusetts. Bishop was given the impression that her New England relatives were "saving" her from a life of poverty and provincialism in Canada. She was brought to a "gloomy house" where even the pet Boston terrier had a "peculiar Bostonian sense of guilt" (*CProse* 21). Feeling like a "guest" in this airless atmosphere, expected to somehow intuit an "unknown past" that no

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one ever directly explained to her, and held to the strict discipline of behaving as a "little girl" should, Bishop's body rebelled. The combination of severe illnesses that struck her in Worcester—acute asthma, eczema, and even symptoms of St. Vitus' dance—almost killed her in that first winter, where she was bedridden and spent most of her time "lying in bed wheezing and reading" (Stevenson 34, Kalstone 27).

Her wheezing seemed to worsen as she felt herself being steadily drawn into a conspiracy of evasion concerning her father's death and mother's insanity. The female voices around her—grandmothers and aunts—formed a "skein" in which she was "caught." "In the Village," Bishop's autobiographical account of her mother's final breakdown, describes the 'inscrutable adult world into which the six-year-old Elizabeth felt herself being pulled "against her will"—a world in which speech is always elliptical and secret shames are guarded even from the child that is most affected by them. Bishop's female relations, refusing to speak about her mother's "embarrassing" mental illness in anything but oblique terms "in front of the child," became associated in her mind with the equivocal: their speech was always subject to two or more interpretations, always generating misleading and confusing double meanings and puns. "Elizabeth" has difficulty with the word "mourning" which she hears as "morning," a confusion that unsettles her: "Why, in the morning, did one put on black" (*CProse* 254). Apparently death—and, in particular, her father's death—has never been explained to the child.

Years later Bishop looks back on the period in her childhood as her initiation into the duplicity of speech and the suffocating constraints that propriety imposes on free expression. In her short memoir, "The Country Mouse," she remembers the hard lessons learned that winter with her Worcester grandparents. First among these was the revelation that she was "becoming one of them": rather than tell a playmate the shameful truth about her mother she lies, saying that her mother has died—a lie born out of a "hideous craving for sympathy." The moment the lie leaves her lips she is gripped by her own capacity to be as "false" as any of her relations, to lie, that is, in the "family voice." In the "family voice"—strongly associated with the garrulousness and duplicity culturally ascribed to women—Bishop finds the tendency toward "morbidity" that she would later attribute to confessional poets (especially women writers like Elizabeth Bowen). The social obligation imposed on the woman to speak in well-modulated tones and to corset unseemly emotions exacted a terrible price on Bishop's own family—

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especially on her mother, whose "real thrilling beautiful voice," stifled by grief and social convention, became, in the end, a terrifying scream.⁷

Long into adulthood Bishop is haunted by nightmare images of dark, shrouded, caterwauling women whose grating voices threaten to invade and animate her own body, and whose intrusive presence she attempts to expel:

In a black sedan with high windows, a tall woman, Aunt Florence, only I knew it wasn't really Aunt Florence, stood outside, wanting to get in talking, talking. I screwed up the window, hurriedly and caught the tips of her gloved fingers in the crack at the top. She kept on talking, talking, begging me to let her in the car, and I felt nauseated. She was dressed all in black, with a large black hat, the gloves were soiled. (KW 1:38)

Any reader of the late poem "In the Waiting Room" will recognize in this Key West nightmare both Aunt Florence (concealed behind the name "Aunt Consuelo" in the poem) and the powerful sensations and images that this vision describes. In both dream and poem Aunt Florence's cries of pain induce nausea in her niece and threaten to invade the sanctuary Bishop has provided for herself. The "armored car of dreams," to borrow a phrase from "Sleeping Standing Up" (CP 30),⁸ has a window-like "mouth" and seems an extension of the dreamer's own body. Breathing in the fierce odor of her aunt's frantic desperation "to be let in," Bishop responds by closing this one avenue of access and figuratively "biting" the hand that reaches out to her. Significantly, Bishop's single most vivid memory of her mother, which she recounts in a 1978 interview with Elizabeth Spire, eerily parallels the narrative of her nightmare. Her mother, dressed incongruously in the mourning clothes required of a widow "in those days," sat with the three-year-old Elizabeth in a swan boat in Boston. A real swan came up to the boat. Her mother "fed it and it bit her finger," splitting the black kid glove and the skin beneath (74). The mother's gloved hands suggest the extent to which her illness became a barrier to intimacy; the child of such a mother might well harbor an unacknowledgable desire to bite the hand that failed to feed her.⁹

"In the Waiting Room" shows that the peculiar tension between Bishop and her Aunt Florence has a long history, precisely as long a history as Bishop's asthmatic condition. Whether or not a poem like "In the Waiting Room" is intended as a serious attempt to describe the psychogenesis of Bishop's asthma, it does link a traumatic childhood confrontation with a woman to the onset of intense physical distress: in

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the poem, as in the dream, Bishop chokes on the "cruel conundrums" of shared female experience (CP 73).

It seems right to suggest, as Alicia Ostriker does, that "In the Waiting Room" is a poem Bishop "waited a lifetime to write" and that, "in some sense, [the poet] has never left the room it describes" (72). But if this is the case we had better not sanitize the meaning of what takes place there. The child-protagonist of the poem, just shy of seven years old, does not simply become alive for the first time to her identity with others of her gender in the waiting room of a dentist's office—rather the reality of "womanhood" is rammed down her throat and she chokes on it. The central moment of the poem occurs when "Elizabeth" hears a cry of pain that disorients her because it seems to come from two places at once—literally from two throats, her Aunt Florence's and her own. In the instant when her "timid and foolish" aunt screams, "Elizabeth" is invaded and possessed from within by what she describes as "the family voice." She feels herself caught in an enmeshed community, a whole "skein," of female voices—voices that seem to rise up out of the pages of the *National Geographic* and shoot straight through her own body. Feeling her own singular sense of herself crowded out by the presence of the collective, "Elizabeth" drowns under wave after black wave as she falls into "cold, blue-black space"; in other words, she experiences the dizziness that always accompanied one of Bishop's asthmatic attacks.

We have become accustomed of late to certain metaphors drawn from the processes of breathing and speech that are used to celebrate the bond between mother and child and the unconstrained female voice. When Helene Cixous speaks to us of the woman artist who opens herself up to her maternal muse, never defending herself against possession by other "unknown women" but welcoming all the multiple "streams of song" that issue from her ecstatically crowded throat, it is, perhaps, a disappointment to enter the claustrophobic atmosphere of Bishop's "waiting room." When the aunt's cry of pain makes what Helene Cixous might call a "vertiginous crossing" into the body of her young niece, Elizabeth derives no pleasure from the "identificatory embrace" that results. The effect is indeed "vertiginous" but only in the worst possible sense; the ground gives way beneath the young girl as her old sense of herself collapses. She is not empowered but emotionally and ontologically battered by the initiation rite. In "The Country Mouse" Bishop is far more explicit about the "great truth" she learned waiting for her aunt to emerge from the dentist's office. "Elizabeth" feels the full force of being "tricked into a false position" (CProse 33). Not only is she trapped forever within her "scabby body and wheezing

lungs," but she will grow to resemble the woman who sat opposite her in the dark room, the woman "who smiled at [her] so falsely every once in a while," a disturbingly willing slave to social etiquette and a censorious world.

It is no accident that the child's disorienting experience is triggered by grotesque images that focus her attention on the cruel conundrums of mother love.¹⁰ The multiple and contradictory meanings that seem to attach to the maternal body and the conflicting emotions that the maternal presence evokes in "Elizabeth" push against each other in the child's throat, swelling up behind her voice, and pitching her into a new world without clear dimensions or comforting boundaries. Like the volcanoes that the child finds pictured in her magazine, Bishop's own mother threatened to erupt in unpredictable ways; emotionally numb one moment, she would spill over in rivulets of fiery, hysterical emotion the next. "Elizabeth," who we know is feeling the loss of her own mother, studies the pages of the *National Geographic*; her attention is understandably drawn to the photographs of mothers and children as she turns the pages of the magazine: black, naked women, their necks strangled, "wound round and round with wire," hold babies whose malleable heads have been "wound round and round with string." A mother's "awful hanging breasts"—so "horrifying" in their power to excite longing and betray trust—are pictured in unbearable proximity to her infant's distorted head.

The black woman captured by the western photographer's shutter and trapped in the grip of her own culture passes a legacy of submission on to her infant. By manipulating her infant's skull she reinforces the very codes of beauty and sexual attractiveness that have delimited her own life, and we begin to wonder how fully the mother is implicated in her culture's campaign to mute individuality and enforce conformity. This compression of the baby's head also reminds the reader of a scene from "In the Village." Elizabeth sits in her grandmother's kitchen in Great Village, Nova Scotia, being force-fed a bowl of porridge by her mother, who struggles to maintain her mental balance by repeating mechanically the primal gestures of maternal love. Then, seeing how tall her child has grown in her absence, the mother impulsively lays her hands on her daughter's head, pushing her down—hoping to bring back the paradisiacal time of her daughter's infancy and bring the shrill tone of their relationship back down to a safer pitch. The child of "In the Village" quickly "slides out from under" the mother's oppressive hands, but she grows up to be the "Elizabeth" who cannot escape the lessons of the waiting room—the heavy emotional legacy that may be

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passed from mother to daughter through the laying on of hands (*CProse* 261). "Sliding beneath a big black wave," the walls of the waiting room seem to dissolve around the child who undergoes the kind of a disillusionment Bishop describes in "Hannibal and Napoleon," an unpublished poem: "the delightful kindergarten, the garden of the world, is shown growing on the hollow soil of a volcano." The "acute" question of "In the Waiting Room" proliferates helplessly across every Bishop poem concerned, however obliquely, with the dynamics of female connection. But the question is stated most explicitly in "Faustina, Or Rock Roses." There, the "sinister kind face" of the black servant tending her white mistress evokes the "cruel black/coincident conundrum" of mother love and female bonding darkened even further by the history of relations between the races: does woman love offer "a dream of protection and rest" or the "very worst, the unimaginable nightmare" (*CP* 73-74)?

Whatever happiness Bishop found with other women grew on the hollow soil of a volcano—since, inevitably, she carried her childhood experience of love's instabilities and betrayals into the world of adult relationships. Bishop's mature poetic style, known for its rich ambiguities and oblique approach to love and sexuality, stresses the emotional dislocation and instability in all efforts of affection. Oscillating between self-exposure and concealment, her poetry captures the approaches and withdrawals that mark any human relationship in which an individual's privacy is necessarily placed at risk. Settling on a poetic style that seems to give and take away meaning in the same motion, Bishop captures the quality of circumlocution that, as we have seen, she first found in the conversation of her grandmother and aunts. Irritated with her family's "hypocrisy," she nevertheless recognizes that such duplicity is a part of the dynamics of human relation—and part of the very language we use as culturally circumscribed human beings.

Bishop's guarded style is attuned to the way parents and their children, poets and their readers, actually appear to one another: the way, that is, that they alternate emotionally between accessibility and obscurity. With the tenacity of the water spider that stays on the surface of the pool, Bishop holds to a poetry of ripples and verbal feints. But in generally refusing to speak directly about her personal tragedies, she would find herself struggling upstream against the currents of a new post-fifties generation of poets—writers like Anne Sexton, who follow the example of Bishop's own dear friend Robert Lowell and plunge headlong into the river of self-reference, making rich use of the sorrow to be found there.

In significant ways, Bishop's responses to trends in the poetry of her contemporaries are moored to somatic issues—dependent, that is, on what Bishop considers to be a crisis in the size and scale of personal ambition. Her notebooks show just how closely she tended to relate poetic control and a stoical and disciplined approach to physical discomfort. Indeed, once we fully appreciate the impact of the poet's allergic inflammations on her life—and her private struggle to bring her swollen body back down to the scale of human life—we gain a better understanding of why Bishop published only ninety-five poems in her lifetime, each one a model of leanness and restraint.

Bishop's personal code of ethics demanded such discipline, in art as well as in life. For this reason her criticism of what she regarded as self-dramatizing confession and easy vulgarity in the work of certain younger poets is far more than the prudish response of a woman raised in an older decorum. The outpourings of Anne Sexton and W. D. Snodgrass raised grave suspicions in Bishop's mind because they struck her as "egocentric—simply that" (Kalstone 209). She considered the general weakening of standards, and the failure to discriminate between good poetry and mere self-promotion, a peculiarly "American sickness" (letter to Lowell, March 5, 1963, qtd. in Millier 48). Both the art and the culture that produced it had grown bloated, flaccid, infected with unoriginality—and needed a good lancing. Essentially she objected to the confessional poetry of her peers because its authors "boasted" about their private catastrophes so shamelessly, and congratulated themselves so continually on their candor. To speak as though one were always in the throes of some intolerable crisis, Bishop wrote in 1967, is

really something new in the world. There have been diaries that were frank—and generally intended to be read after the poet's death. Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world. . . . The tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves." ("Second Chance," *Time*, June 2, 1967, p. 69)

The key to Bishop's poetic style, its minimalism, deflection, and hard-won moral vision, lies in her battle to rid her work of the excessive "morbidity" she recognized in the world around her. Morbidity, the body's susceptibility to disease and corruption, becomes Bishop's trope for moral as well as physical "weakness and acquiescence" spreading over the younger generation of poets like the sly growth of mildew. The molds and mildews that make her choke, swell, and violently shake were "just enough to serve as a hint of morbidity" (*CProse* 228), and

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reminded her of the "great American sickness" she diagnosed in a March 1961 letter to Lowell: "Too much of everything—too much painting, too much poetry, too many novels—and much too much money. . . . And no one really feeling anything much" (Millier 47). Bishop believed that her ethical aversion to fatty degeneration distinguished her in an age that seemed to have lost its discrimination and restraint. A deeply reserved and subtle poet, Bishop would apply a cool compress to her poems at the first sign of inflated self-regard or swollen ego.

Objecting to the way confessional art transformed the poet into a diarist and the reader into a confidante or confessor, Bishop insisted that the actual bond between writer and reader was marked, not by genuine intimacy, but by distance and impersonality. Adrienne Rich has suggested the intimacy was altogether absent in Bishop's later work, where the poet seems to examine, instead, the way people are distanced from one another by differences of class and race (16). But the effect of distance that Rich observes may just as easily be seen as the poet's way of expressing her own experience of intimacy: the unyielding reality of loss, separation, even betrayal, that makes erotic and emotional connection "a billion times told lovelier," and "more dangerous"—to borrow from Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Bishop's poetic masters.

Finally Bishop shows us that writer and reader are linked to one another not by imagined intimacy but by the bonds of a common language—a language that is never straightforward in its effects. "In the Village," as we have already seen, describes the poet's early awakening to the fact that language is irremediably equivocal, open to two or more possibilities, always hiding something in the process of revealing everything. Donald Hall was frustrated by this "equivocal" quality in the poetic language of Marianne Moore, which for him always appeared teasingly inaccessible—"giving as it takes away, folding back on itself the moment one begins to understand so that an exactly opposite meaning begins to seem plausible" (84–85). But it would seem that Bishop came to accept an ambiguity that once troubled her, transforming equivocation into a treasured artistic effect. The moments of apparent personal connection between the poet and her reader are immeasurably enriched by the understanding they share that each must finally remain an irresolvable mystery to the other.

The mystery remains despite the efforts of literary interpreters to, as Bishop put it, "pretty up" the poet's work. "Poetry should have more of the unconscious spots left in," she writes as she distinguishes her own poetry from that of Wallace Stevens: "What I tire of quickly in Wallace

Stevens is the self-consciousness—poetry so aware lacks depth” (KW 2:89). It seems a mild irony that the richly ambiguous Bishop, by contrast, seems to make a model of clarity out of a poet famous for his own brand of obscurity. Once again her criticism of the postmodern poet is directed at the way he dissects his own psyche and deprives his reader of a distinct pleasure—the delight of speculation. In a fragment from the same notebook Bishop reminds herself that “art is never altogether pleasing unless one can suspect it of ulterior motive . . . of a ‘secret confidence’” that the poet has reserved to herself. A fundamentally shy person, Bishop nevertheless accepts that the reader’s pleasure lies in pursuing her maddeningly elusive presence in the poem. She does all she can to enhance the thrill of the chase through subtle indirection.

Bishop obscured the shape of her personal life, of course, for other reasons as well, reasons having to do with the social and aesthetic conventions of her day.¹¹ Love and sexuality were threatening subjects for a woman with poetic ambitions, and doubly so for a woman of Bishop’s sexual proclivity. Even in her late poems, when she is no longer cloaking her own sexuality under the guise of animal courtship, her verse still dances around the subject of homosexuality. Bishop’s strategies of concealment resemble those of the female lizard she describes on a scrap of paper folded into the back cover of one of her notebooks: the lizard “hides . . . all her tail, all her tiny horny sides” while the males around her “blow out [their] beautiful rose balloon [for all] to see.” The poet’s imagination during her thirties is distinguished by a desire to protect herself from everything that threatened either the borders of her own body or her uniqueness as a person and an artist, and her poems seem to expand outward in an intimate embrace of the world only to fold back on themselves and on the haven of the sole self.

Bishop’s “O Breath” is one of her few published poems about the eroticized female body. At the same time it is also one of the few poems in which she consciously and conspicuously turns her attention to the “equivocal” nature of her own poetic style. Moreover, here she uses asthma to describe the stifling pressures that impinge on her life as a poet. “O Breath” is a captivatingly ambiguous love poem that plays with the narrow passageway for authorized speech permitted a woman of her class and education in 1955. Beneath the poem’s surface reticence, we sense something moving invisibly: a faint image of erotic coupling, or its aftermath. All we do see clearly is the broken contours of this poem as it appears on the page—as though it were determined to speak though under enormous pressure to hold back. The poem’s gasping, halting rhythms and labored caesuras mimic the wheezing lungs of a

restless asthmatic trying to expel the suffocating air. In the struggle to bathe, each hard-won phrase wrested from silence arches over the negative troughs, the breaks, the white space left on the page. The poem's structure enables Bishop to "catch her breath" and give the agonies of asthma visible shape—the cradling and containing rib cage of words:

Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,
 silent, bored really blindly veined,
 grieves, maybe lives and lets
 live, passes bets,
 something moving but invisibly,
 and with what clamor why restrained
 I cannot fathom even a ripple.
 (See the thin flying of nine black hairs
 four around one five the other nipple,
 flying almost intolerably on your own breath.)
 Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound
 to be there,
 whatever we must own equivalents for,
 something that maybe I could bargain with
 and make a separate place beneath
 within if never with.

We seem to have entered that ambiguous realm of address where two people have become one, yet remain irremediably distant from one another. One lover speaks fitfully between gasps for air as she watches the woman lying beside her "silent bored really." The difficulty and "restraint" associated with breathing and speaking in the poem suggest the terrible restraints the poet labors under as a woman and a lesbian bound to lead a life of surface conformity and concealed depths.

When the speaker of the poem questions what lies beneath her lover's "celebrated" breast, she does so in a context that extends beyond this single lyric: "O Breath" is the last of Bishop's "Four Poems," a short cycle that concerns itself with the frustrating puzzle of "uninnocent" conversation between lovers—of exchanges that "engage the senses, / only half meaning to" until "there is no choice" and "no sense," or until the tension is relieved with an "unexpected kiss" (CP 76, 77). The poetic sequence concentrates on images of the heart's helpless, bewildered imprisonment in miscommunication and its unanticipated release into authentic expression. In "Conversation," lovers hold to their positions, willfully misunderstanding one another, until the great cage of misconception breaks up in the air around them and they reach a point of understanding when "a name/and all its connotations are the same."

In "Rain Towards Morning" an electrical storm suddenly ceases, its "great light cage" is releasing a million birds from bondage, and the sky brightens like a face surprised by love. With "While Someone Telephones" the cosmic is brought back down to the personal as the poet shifts from electrically charged "wires" of light to the crossed wires of lovers parted by distance and disconnection waiting tensely for contact and "the heart's release."

Like the protagonists of the other poems, the speaker of "O Breath" regards her lover with tender wariness. She lies awake, watching her lover's breast and the nine thin, black hairs surrounding the nipples—small, flying hairs that stir "almost intolerably" on her lover's "own breath." Aroused by the sight, she nevertheless seems shaken by her lover's apparent insularity, her self-absorption, the regular rise and fall of her breast. Such shallow breathing is "almost intolerable" to the speaker because she herself is forced to gasp for air. The placid lover remains to the poem's end an enigma whose motivations escape the speaker, though she hopes to find in her lover's heart an "equivalent" for her own tumult, her own anxious desire for the unexpected, releasing kiss.

"O Breath," like "Conversation" (the first of the "Four Poems"), gives expression to "the tumult in the heart" that "keeps asking questions" only to "stop and undertake to answer" in the same mystified voice. The speaker of "O Breath," however, seems to talk only with herself, or with the reader. Since the true inner workings of her lover are invisible to her, the speaker can only project her own inner turmoil onto her lover by way of analogy, of correspondence. Hoping that boredom is only a mask for desire, but unable to "fathom even a ripple" of her lover's motivations, the speaker has no recourse but to draw from her own experience of desire in describing what might live and move within the inaccessible woman breathing beside her. She imagines the force of desire within the body lying beside her as "something" moving invisibly—something caged within that body as surely as a clamoring heart, or a pair of wheezing lungs. But when she stops and undertakes an answer to the proliferating question of the heart, the reader cannot tell the difference between inquiry and resolution, and peace is still something to be negotiated once common ground is finally discovered. Like the bond between the lovers, the release obtained at the poem's end is uncertain and "equivocal."

"O Breath" focuses on the "almost intolerable" proximity of the loved one's body, awakening a longing for still deeper contact that may not be achieved. This is no utopian vision of a lesbian continuum where

lovers always feel easy in one another's presence, able to, as Cixous would say, "expire without running out of breath." For Bishop the urge to penetrate the deepest recesses of another person must be resisted for the sake of both people involved. The tactful poet or lover acknowledges the bounds as well as the bonds of love

Given her equivocal experience of "home" and the "efforts of affection," Bishop had to reinvent her life before she could draw strength from the past and translate her body into song. This reinvention is apparent in a series of dreams that link the poet's own pursuit of "quiet breath" to the figure of the mermaid breathing effortlessly in amniotic seas. Ultimately, these dreams prepare the poet for her life in Brazil, where she found, for a time, the happiness that had eluded her since childhood. Cradled by an "atmosphere of uncritical affection" in her adopted country, the poet would be able to navigate the waters of memory—and explore the remarkable powers of healing that lie within.¹²

The mermaid dreams form an extraordinary sequence that explores the yearnings, imprisonings, and problematic releases of the eroticized female body. Each dream centers on the strange hybrid shape of the sea creature. In the first of these visions, a dying mermaid washed ashore and gasping for breath becomes an emblem of Bishop's own anxieties. Her estrangement as an artist and a lesbian finds expression in the foundering ocean-woman exiled from her natural element. In a later celebratory dream, the mermaid is returned to the sea, where her body feels exhilaratingly weightless. The vision of liberation prepares the way for the greater personal happiness and freedom of expression that Bishop would experience during her first years in Brazil. Though the mermaid begins as a tragic figure, she eventually allows Bishop to navigate the dangerous shoals and eddies of a life spent in the body of a woman.¹³

The mermaid first makes her appearance in a fearful dream Bishop had one night in Stonington, Maine. In a letter to Robert Lowell she confesses that the vision left her shaken:

I've been indulging myself in a nightmare of finding a gasping mermaid under one of these exposed docks—you know, trying to tear the mussels off the piles for something to eat—horrors (Kalstone 180).

Given her asthma, it is little wonder that she identifies so strongly with a mermaid washed ashore, or a fish held half out of the water and forced to breath in "the terrible oxygen." An odd thing, in fact, about

the reference to "terrible oxygen" in her most anthologized poem, "The Fish," is that Bishop, the accurate observer and brilliant naturalist, has got her facts wrong. Fish find oxygen no more "terrible" than we do, since they live on it as well; their gills, however, are equipped to obtain oxygen from water, and not from air. For Bishop to link terror with oxygen she would have had to first project her own fears onto the sea creature.

What could be worse than to be left "gasping" in an alien atmosphere trying desperately to tear sustenance from a cruelly implacable world? Like the mermaid, the poet feels herself to be unequipped to breathe the same air, to live by the same social strictures, as other beings whose natures are different from her own. The dream suggests that Bishop dreads the "exposure" of her unconventionality—of her body and her homosexuality. Ultimately, in the way it evokes feelings of freakishness and alienation, the nightmare of the dying mermaid recalls the pathos of "The Little Mermaid," the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale that Bishop knew and loved so well. In the Andersen tale, the mermaid destroys herself in her futile attempt to cross over into the world of human (heterosexual) union. Seen in this light, Bishop's dream is a poignant reminder of the border-crossings lesbians were forced to make in the forties and fifties—when so many felt compelled to conceal their nature and publicly embrace the heterosexual erotic ideal.

If we look backward through even the earliest juvenilia, we see Bishop's struggling to avoid the horror of foundering and hear her yearning for a watery haven. In the 1928 poem "Sonnet," written while Bishop was still a schoolgirl in Massachusetts, she longs for the "subaqueous stillness of the sea," where she might find "a spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool/Heart" (CP 214). At least fifteen years later Bishop had a dream that returned her to the sea, where she enjoyed a rare moment of physical freedom and release. The beauty of the mermaid as an image of the poet is visible in a Key West notebook account of this utopian vision:

The fish was large, about 3 ft. long, large-scaled, metallic gold only a beautiful rose color. I myself seemed slightly smaller than life-size. We met in water the color of the water of the 3rd—clear, green, light (—more like the cut edge of plate glass, or birch leaves in bright sun, than emerald.) He was very kind and said he would be glad to lead me to the fish, but we'd have to overtake them. He led the way through the water, glancing around at me every now and then with his big eyes to see if I was following. I

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was swimming easily with scarcely any motion. In his mouth he carried a new, galvanized bucket. . . . He was taking them a bucket of air—that's how he'd happened to meet me. I looked in—rough water had got in to make the bucket of air a bucket of large bubbles, seething and shining—hissing, I think, too. I had a vague idea they were to be used as decorations, for some sort of celebration (a "coronation"). (KW 1:15)

Like the Stonington nightmare, this dream is intensely interested in air and the mechanics of breathing underwater. In the "inverted" world of sleep, the mortal dreamer seems to breath effortlessly beneath the waves while fish require live-giving oxygen from the surface. The sea, which Bishop once described as the "dark deep . . . element bearable to no mortal" but only "to fish and to seals" (*CP* 65) has become strangely natural to her. In these waters that make mortal bones ache and hands and tongues burn, she is fantastically and utterly free. Like the riverman in a later poem, Bishop communes with speaking underwater spirits, attending a subaqueous "party" where beautiful rose-colored fishes gather to crown one of their number with shining bubbles in "some sort of celebration." The bubbles hiss like a community of whispering voices free to seethe and shine and rejoice.

It is tempting to see the dream as Bishop's way of imagining a time when she could swim the rough waters of intimacy with an ease that had always eluded her. Like the "clear, gray, icy water" of the northern seas she knew so well, the poet-dreamer is "suspended" between air and land, impervious to suffering, poised indifferently above the rocky breasts and cold hard mouth of the world—and the "cruel conundrums" of love (*CP* 65, 73). Rough water does not disturb the dream's serene mood; instead it turns the air that has troubled Bishop all her life into large shining bubbles—the poet's lifelong metaphor for the buoyant spirit freed from gravity and all physical laws, and enabled to rise above all crippling circumstance.

In sleep, Bishop could take on the sexual ambiguity and dazzling versatility of the mermaid, a creature of the sea who breathes with miraculous ease. At the end of her life the true nature of the yearnings expressed in the 1928 "Sonnet" are given fuller, franker expression in a poem to which she gave the same name. In the 1979 "Sonnet," published posthumously, Bishop imagines what it would take to free the bubble-like spirit from the prison of social intolerance, liberate herself from the divided existence: but she cannot conceive of such a possibility, since the very laws of the physical universe would have to be broken. Only in the seclusion of her notebooks and her dreams did she

dare to write unguardedly about love and sexuality. As she explains to Anne Stevenson in a letter dated January 8, 1964, Bishop thought of herself as being born into a certain era, situation, decorum, and for that reason she could never truly breath freely—or sing gaily in full-throated ease.

The poet's desire to make a separate peace with her own woman's body by finding some "pure elixir" of *amor matris*—until her arrival in Brazil, a desire reserved for the world of dreams—takes extraordinary shape in *Questions of Travel*, the volume of poetry she dedicated to her Brazilian lover. There the poem "The Riverman" seems to resolve or dissolve fear and hope, mother and maid, in the "watery, dazzling dialectic" of art. When Bishop was readying her third volume of poetry for publication, she sent off a worried note to Robert Lowell about "The Riverman." Lowell calmed her fears by assuring her that this new book would be her very best and reminding her of a dream she once had:

I wouldn't worry about the Amazon poem—it's the best fairy story in verse I know. It brings back an old dream of yours, you said you felt you were a mermaid scraping barnacles off a wharf-pile. That was Maine, not Brazil. (Kalstone 196)

Astute as always about the psychic origins and ulterior motives of his friend's work, Lowell had made the connection between Bishop's dream and "The Riverman," the tale of a man who has been "singled out" by the natural spirits of the Amazon, given the power of breathing underwater, and initiated into the rites of the shaman, or spiritual healer. Lowell is not deflected by Bishop's use of a male protagonist, recognizing at once that the apprentice shaman is a mask for the poet herself. He remembers Bishop's dream about the mermaid washed ashore and gasping for breath, a dream of extreme dislocation and deprivation, and sees that "The Riverman" is Bishop's transposition of her nightmare into a different key—into a vision of strength. Recognizing the personal origins of the poem, Lowell sees all that the new poem implies about Bishop's emerging poetic—a poetic of healing. Under the cloak of riverman, Bishop tests the waters of her Brazilian life and the haven of "uncritical affection" she had found there—and her capacity to draw from her own heart the remedy for her distress.

"The Riverman" is one of the few of her pieces that Bishop praises for not being literal or accurate—for being entirely a dream salvaged from her own psychic yearnings. At the time when she wrote the poem about a river that "drains the jungle" and "draws from the very heart/of the earth the remedy/for each of the diseases," she had never actually seen the Amazon: "When I finally got to the Amazon in February and

March [1960] I found I hadn't been too accurate at all, thank goodness." Her Amazon, the river of her imagination, is not drawn from the immediate world that surrounded her as she wrote.

Her Brazilian home is the heart of her experience there and the source of her understanding of the unseen river. As she describes it in "Songs for the Rainy Season," the studio her lover built for her away above the main house is bathed in water, cradled by a "private cloud" of vapor, and from this nest the poet can hear the "brook sing loud/from a rib cage/of giant fern" (CP 101). Safe in her aerie, the poet, like the riverman beneath the water's surface, can approach the "family of mortalities" that plagued her life, the choking web of voices she left behind in Great Village and Worcester—a "skein of voices" that she can now unravel; like the riverman traveling beneath the waters of the Amazon she glides "right through the wicker traps" of "Godfathers and cousins" who can "never, never catch" her now.

When the moon burns white
and the river makes that sound
like a primus pumped up high—
that fast, high whispering
like a hundred people at once—
I'll be there below.

The poet who wrote these lines had finally found her element—for as long as she could feel at home in her Brazilian haven. The river she imagines is no more, and no less, than her own studio which she describes in a letter to Baumann as "one large room . . . away up in the air" containing a "kitchenette with a pump and a primus stove for tea" (December 28, 1952). The stove made the studio resound with the "fast, high whispering" of the hissing kettle. From her aerie she conjures the Amazon from deep within her own interior, and learns to practice the healing art of remembrance. In *Questions of Travel* Bishop's imagination follows the stream of emotions that link the primus stove beside her as she writes and the "Little Marvel Stove" in her grandmother's kitchen so many years ago. She hears in the Brazilian rain the sound of her grandmother's voice, "talking to hide her tears" ("Sestina," CP 123). And so Bishop's travels take her back to herself—through the once threatening, but now delightful, equivocality of language: with a brilliant pun on her own family name, she escapes her fear of the vocal skein created by the past. Safe in her Brazilian home, Bishop has become the "primus"—a choirmistress who untangles the aural web. From this time forward, she will conjure her haunting family voices and lead them in song.

NOTES

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¹ Bishop and Louise Crane made Key West their home through 1943 while Bishop completed the poems that would make up her first book, *North and South*. Bishop continued to winter there in the home of her friend Marjorie Stevens until 1949.

² Notebook 1:59. Until the journals were recovered only a few years ago, no one had access to them since the day Bishop herself entrusted the papers to a legatee in Brazil, where they stayed in a shoebox for twenty years. They are now housed in the Vassar College Library. Permission has been granted by the Vassar College Library to examine manuscript material in preparation for this article. Excerpts from the unpublished letters and notebooks of Elizabeth Bishop are used with permission of her Estate, copyright 1991 by Alice Helen Methfessel. All excerpts also appear courtesy of Vassar College Library. Subsequent references to the "Key West Notebooks" are cited in the text as KW, with notebook number and page number.

³ Bishop published only a handful of poems that describe erotic pleasure overtly. As Lorrie Goldensohn suggests in her consistently illuminating essay on Bishop's erotic imagination, an unequivocal vision of erotic fulfillment may have been blocked in the "rooted sadness of Bishop's childhood" (46). But however it arose, Bishop's characteristic reticence poses problems for her critics. Just when Bishop is beginning to be given her due as a complex poet, the personal directness of much recent woman's poetry has seduced some commentators into underestimating Bishop's talent once again and returning her to the same niche to which she was relegated during her lifetime. But some readers are beginning to recognize that Bishop, in her subtle way, explores the same issues that preoccupy the current, bolder generation of women writers. Joanne Diehl, for instance, warns us that Bishop's poetry "only apparently evades issues of sexuality and gender." Diehl senses an "ominous quality to Bishop's restraint more suggestive than confession" (97), and concludes that a highly erotic imagination is fully present in her poetry: "Verbal masking allows Bishop to preserve the erotic while deconstructing heterosexist categories" (93). Similarly, Bonnie Costello points to the way a woman writer may use "female vantage point" as "the concrete from which the universal is projected" so as to "unite readers before the shared mystery of embodiment" (309). Costello concludes that Bishop and many other women poets "have resisted labeling [their artistic vision] as female precisely because they wish to make it available to all readers" (310). I argue that Bishop uses her physical ailments to develop a poetic that confronts cultural labels and their stifling impact on personal and erotic expression.

⁴ This passage is worth quoting in full: "People's attitude about such things [alcoholism and its treatment] is really quite different from that in the U.S. [The Brazilians] are amazingly tolerant, or indifferent, or ignorant. . . . I suspect one thing that made it harder for me in N.Y. and other places was the more Puritanical outlook that I have inherited myself."

⁵ Reference is to Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, hereafter cited as *CProse*.

⁶ Bishop's father, her grandfather, and three of her uncles succumbed to

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alcoholism, her own weakness as well. Using a Conradian metaphor, Bishop considers the double lives led by her male relatives, the stealth and guilty secrecy, the lies that gave off an odor of mortality. From her Brazilian studio Bishop remembers her mother's brother and the "icicle [that formed] in the bottom of her stomach" each time he approached her when she was a child: "I realize only now that [Uncle Neddy] represented 'the devil' for me, not a violent, active Devil, but a gentle black one, a devil of weakness, acquiescence, tentatively black, like sooty mildew" (*CP* 228). Trying to understand her repulsion, Bishop focuses on her uncle's "proud and morbid" voice—the voice he used when he spoke of his gory childhood accidents and boasted about his stoical "feats of endurance." The disgust she feels with her uncle's weakness and passivity is closely related to her aesthetic and moral aversion to the morbid, self-congratulatory tone of confessional poetry.

⁷ In a notebook Bishop records a scrap of verse that describes the false "family voice" as a king of mutation, a corruption of reality (KW 2:47):

speaking
It is an adaptation or
social obligation of some sort
the real thrilling beautiful voice
is off somewhere else singing loudly
fully
in clear choir.

Throughout her life Bishop grew irritated when she heard the tone of social obligation in the poetry of female contemporaries like Elizabeth Bowen. It was the voice of "old silver" and still older class distinction, of taste in clothes, and husbands that she distrusted: "They have to make quite sure that the reader is not going to misplace them socially, first—and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they'd like to say. . . ." (letter to Ilse and Kit Barker, February 28, 1955). Beneath a woman's nervous boasting chatter about being "protected" by her impeccable social standing and taste, Bishop recognizes desperation: "I suppose it is at bottom a flaw in reality that irritates me" because women want to show that they are "nice" and lead beautifully polished lives "even when they aren't" and even when they don't.

⁸ Reverence is to Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, hereafter cited as *CP*.

⁹ Bishop's childhood asthma seems to recur most violently at points in her adult life when she is forced to consider the potentially suffocating nature of maternal love. A short time after Margaret Miller's hospitalization, her mother arrived from America, bringing with her a stifling hothouse atmosphere of maternal attentiveness. Mrs. Miller seemed to place an additional strain on the already distraught Bishop, who began to feel her carefully cultivated independence and emotional control breaking down in the presence of the older woman's devotion and solicitude. Significantly, the surge of vulnerability that she experiences when Margaret's mother arrives in Europe lands Bishop in a hospital herself: the strain of "mother-love" leads to a severe recurrence of Bishop's acute childhood asthma. Writing to Frani Blough, she points to her deep discomfort with disarming flippancy: "Mother-love, isn't it awful. I long for an Arctic climate where no emotions of any sort can possibly grow, always

excepting disinterested 'friendship' of course" (Kalstone 65). For Bishop "mother-love" would always wear a threatening aspect—and the "imaginary iceberg" of emotional detachment she conjures in her letter to Blough would remain a strongly appealing fantasy throughout her life. That Bishop gradually gravitated away from Arctic climates, choosing instead to make her home in equatorial humidity and cultivate intimate friendships, says much about her intrepid spirit. The tropical life only aggravated her chronic asthma and allergies, those physical signs of emotional distress, and yet when she returned from Europe she moved directly to Florida and embraced all the forms of adventure and hardship that the tropics came to represent for her.

¹⁰ As Lee Edelman argues persuasively, what finally "horrifies" the child is the "fundamental affinity" she shares with monstrously disfigured women—with both the deformed mothers who stare back at her from the pages of the *National Geographic* and the women who "smile falsely" at her from the other side of the waiting room, their body shapes distorted by corsets and whalebone. She too will be imprisoned within the "awful hanging breasts" and the unempowered body of a woman.

¹¹ For a fascinating discussion of Bishop's indirections on homosexuality and erotic fulfillment, see Goldensohn.

¹² From her new home in Samambaia, Brazil, Bishop writes her doctor in a letter dated April 21, 1953: "But an atmosphere of uncritical affection is just what suits *me*, I'm afraid—kisses and hugs, and endearments and diminutives, flying around" (Bishop's italics).

¹³ The body of the mermaid, a siren with her sexuality muted and concealed, lost in the sleek lines of a fish's tail, became a problematic fantasy image for Bishop in more ways than one. Like the late poem "Crusoe in England," the mermaid image speaks to the limitations of homoerotic love and single-sex friendship: Bishop's wish to "propagate [her] kind" is achingly expressed through Crusoe's inherently infertile love for Friday and through the mermaid's eternally maiden status. One can only speculate on how terribly mocked Bishop must have felt by a body that often swelled but never grew large with life.

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Ezra Pound's "The Return" (published 1912) has been much admired and widely praised: the young E. E. Cummings was "thrilled" on first hearing it; Yeats used it to introduce *A Vision*; the reviewers of *Ripostes*, the volume in which it first appeared, singled it out as one of Pound's best poems and seemed almost compelled to quote it, often in full, thus:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
 and half turn back;
These were the "Wing'd-with-Awe,"
Inviolable,

Gods of the winged shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

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Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!

Readers such as Donald Davie, who admit the obscurity of the poem's gestures at some easily detachable meaning, come much closer to acknowledging the "complicated sort of significance," the quality of "objective reality," that Pound himself felt in relation to this work.² In *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* Davie, after quoting the whole poem, writes:

As the title of Davie's book indicates, he finds Pound's analogy between the visual, relatively a-temporal form of sculpture and the aural temporal medium of poetry convincing. Hugh Kenner, in *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951), had also found that the poem's complexities could be made intelligible, and given a certain "objective" quality, by recourse to the analogy with sculpture. In that work he writes that the poem "exists primarily in and for itself, a lovely object, a fragment of Greek frieze . . . firmly drawn . . ." (124). The objectivity of this sort of verse is such that it "should not be searched for allusions," for it exists "with a minimum of reference to circumjacent experiences, tensions, or categories of language" (123, 124). The implication here is that poems like "The

Return" have a sort of solid reality that, like sculpture, (nearly) escapes the toils of time and personality and language, and (nearly) manifests itself to the phenomenologically instantaneous and total sense of sight.

Twenty years later, in *The Pound Era*, Kenner modifies his view of the poem. Although he still speaks of "sharp images," meters which "cut," and "sculptured stasis," he affirms the linguistic character of the poem's effects (189-91). In this later reading it is not the analogy with sculpture but "the rhythm that defines the meaning" of the poem (189). Yet even in *The Pound Era* Kenner implies that it is the power of the visible that informs the poem:

... but at exactly the halfway point a single and emphatic rhythmic figure

/ 'oo/ 'o/ ' /

enters and so asserts itself as out of nine consecutive lines to dominate six. Here it is three times in succession:

Gods of the / winged / shoe!

With them the / silver / hounds,

sniffing the / trace of / air!

... The poem is about the mode of divine apparitions in poetry. (190)

Here rhythm is a visible figure (we can see it on Kenner's page) which has a kind of agency, and is the mode of "divine apparitions."

There is nothing "wrong" with this tendency to invoke the power and immediacy of sight when reading "The Return." On the contrary, this mode of explication is compelling if only because it is true to Pound's own theoretical-poetic obsessions. Moreover, were we to attempt to purge critical writing (let alone poetry!) of such appeals to the sense of vision we would rob ourselves of a large and largely indispensable critical vocabulary. We should have to become suspicious of all talk of overall form, all critical metaphors of architecture and architectonics, all talk of spaces (both cleared and uncleared), and any recourse to the explanatory power of formulae, semiotic squares, diagrams, or charts. We cannot, however, in the space of this essay, deal directly with the large question of the role of visual analogy in critical writing. We must narrow our scope to an examination of visual analogy at work in Pound's poem, and its most compelling exegeses. We must, therefore, examine the role of iconicity in "The Return" in order to understand how it passes, or appears to pass, beyond "the sort of meaning that music normally has" into the "objective reality" of the visible, the sculptural—in order finally to understand the psychic truth that enables rhythm to appear as a "divine" apparition.

EZRA POUND'S "THE RETURN"

An icon is an image or likeness—a portrait or statue. In the Eastern Church an icon represents some sacred personage and is itself often regarded as sacred. In the field of linguistics, C. S. Peirce has characterized the icon as that sort of sign which bears a more than arbitrary relation of resemblance between signifier and signified. The relation of painted portrait to its subject is the commonest explanatory analogy. Yet since language for the most part lacks the visual resources of painting or sculpture, linguistic iconicity depends for its effects on context—the semantic field in which the icon is manifest, and the conceptual system which has generated that semantic field.³ Poetic iconicity depends upon the poem's meaning and upon some readerly construction of the poet's intention. In the first stanza of "The Return," line lengths, rhythms, and the imperative to "See" combine with the poem's apparent subject (the return of the gods), and with Pound's declaration that gods are eternal states of mind manifested by artists possessed of virtuous technique, in order to produce a fine example of poetic iconicity:⁴

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

The poem begins with a decasyllabic line. Since it is the foundation of iambic pentameter, the ten-syllable verse is probably the most common in English poetry. But this ten-syllable verse is emphatically not iambic pentameter. Pound rejected iambic pentameter as an indiscriminate rhythm form blurring the necessarily precise and proper alignment of signifiers (words, rhythms, etc.) with the emotions or energies signified (gods/states of minds). Wishing to convey an "exact impression of exactly what one means" (*Letters* 23), Pound here attempts to find the rhythm form that will "belong to the particular creative emotion or energy which it purports to represent."⁵ The first stanza exemplifies the sort of thing Pound meant: attempting to align form and emotion precisely, he resists what seemed to him the easy, empty fluency of the iambic pentameter and makes his rhythm "belong to" notions of tentativeness, uncertainty, slowness. He troubles the pace of the first line with imperatives, interjection, commas, and semicolon. He carefully places the word "tentative" at the end of an enjambed line where the act of reading becomes itself tentative. He does the same thing with "uncertain" in line 3. In keeping with the notion that gods/states-of-mind, when they take form, appear to the sense of vision—what he calls the phantastikon, or phanopoeia⁶—he directs us to

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"See." We are commanded to *see* the rhythmic, temporal, linguistic processes and techniques of the poem as if they were divine figures. From the very beginning this poem evokes both the visual and religious dimensions of the Icon, and Pound's Imagisme and iconicity here aspire not to a merely visual but to a visionary condition.

The desire for theophany that apparently founds Pound's poetic reveals what Peirce would call an indexical quality inherent in Pound's poetic icons. For Pound the relation between signifier and signified ought to be more than arbitrary, and more than a relation of resemblance. The relation between signifier and signified is, or *ought* to be, causal or indexical. Yet it is rather difficult to separate cause from effect in Pound's poetic. If, for example, a god is a state of mind and a person *becomes* a god upon entering such a mind-state, we may find it difficult to locate the cause of such states since they are, or may be, both outside of and encompassed by human, mortal minds. Of course there are differences. The divine mind-states are "eternal," and poets are eternal only insofar as their technique enables them to eternalize their *virtu* in poetry. But the *virtu*-ous poem does enable the poet to efface this difference and breach the barrier between an eternal/divine/visionary reality and a temporal/mortal/arbitrary actuality. Thus the indexical quality of the Poundian icon indicates a powerful desire for a substantial identity of signifier and signified: a consubstantiality, as it were, of signifier and signified.

This desire sometimes produces intense iconic effects like that found at the end of line 2 of "The Return." Here the gods' "slow feet" step forward slowly in a slow metrical foot. The effect is an equation of divine body parts (gods' feet) with a part of the poem's rhythm (the spondaic foot). Remembering that the spondee is a metrical unit associated with libation—a sacrificial pouring out of wine to the gods, accompanied by two long, slow notes — and recalling Pound's lifelong tendency to figure divine apparition, poetic impulse, and bodily energy in terms of *fluids*, we realize that this libational rhythm declares a kind of consubstantiality between poet, poem, and gods. This sort of richly overdetermined iconicity helps account for the sense of "complex significance" and "objectivity" felt by both Pound and his readers in the face of this poem, and for the relative ease with which we obey his injunction to *see* the gods returning in and through it.

If a desire for a relation of identity between rhythmic signifier and visible signified appears to found this poem, what is it that founds that desirê, and intimates the plausibility or possibility of its satisfaction? In

EZRA POUND'S "THE RETURN"

his fine essay on "Icons, Etymologies, Origins and Monkey Puzzles in the Languages of Upward and Fenellosa," Richard Godden asserts that:

The translation of language to iconic and indexical forms is mythic in intention. Iconic logic leads to the 'freshness' of pre-history, in that it removes language from exchange and restores it, via proximity and resemblance, to Nature. . . . Nature is both source and destination to mythic models of language, in which the sign arises from an intensification of the subject's encounter with the external world. . . . Mythical thought rests solidly in immediate experience. The shape of a hill, a bird's breath in thawing air, or a movement on a body of water is so distinct to the perceiver that the object may be said to have a presence. The totality of the scene falls away and the encounter is resolved in the singular cry. Cassirer, following Usener and Spieth, sees that word as the creation of a 'momentary god.' (229, 230)

I should like here to suggest that the Nature that is the aim of iconic intention is human nature; that the intended myth is a psychoanalytic myth centered around a crucial moment of the subject's encounter with the external world; and that the "momentary god" dwells within poets and readers alike. In other words, I should like to introduce the psychoanalytic concept of the Mirror Stage as that which founds the desire for, and intimates the possibility of, visionary iconicity.

According to Jaques Lacan, the Mirror Stage is a psychical moment in which the human infant, before it has achieved the ability to coordinate and control its bodily energies and impulses, achieves an apprehension of control and unity by identifying with a totalizing image of itself which comes from outside itself.⁷ The Mirror Stage establishes the foundations of what will become the ego upon a specular and imaginary ground. Lacan stresses the incommensurable relation between the totalizing image seen in the mirror and the relatively uncoordinated state of the body which would assume and embrace that vision of totality. As a consequence of this incommensurability, the ego is from the first marked by an unbridgeable gap, a fundamental otherness or alienation, since it is constituted as an ideality which is as unattainable—or Imaginary—as it is fiercely, narcissistically desired.

The psychical field of the Imaginary bears, in Lacan's psychoanalytic mythos, a heterogeneous relation to the realm of speech, language, and the array of human laws and institutions founded on language, which he calls the Symbolic. There is, nevertheless, the possibility of an interrelation between the Imaginary and Symbolic fields — an irruption of Imaginary, visionary, moments within the linguistic field of the

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Symbolic. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Julia Kristeva indicates the condition which makes such an intersection possible when she presents the Mirror Stage, in combination with the thesis of castration, as a necessary "thetic phase" which is "the precondition for signification, i.e., the precondition for the positing of language" (48). To put it briefly, and perhaps too simply, when the thesis of castration inaugurates the accession to the Symbolic-linguistic field, the Imaginary moment becomes the moment of the sign. That is to say it is possible to read the Mirror Stage in linguistic terms: the *imago* of the totalized, coherent, visionary self gazed at in the mirror becomes the signified for the relatively incoherent collection of energies, impulses, rhythms—signifiers—which move through the body of the gazer.⁸ From the idealizing perspective of the desiring subject this sign ought to be characterized by an "exact" (to use Pound's term) relation between signifier and signified. As Laplanche and Pontalis write, "The Imaginary implies a type of apprehension in which factors such as resemblance and homeomorphism play a decisive role, as is borne out by a sort of coalescence of the signifier with the signified" (210). But this ideal is haunted by the alien otherness inhabiting the Mirror Stage, and the truth of the signifier—the truth of negativity and castration—which is, as Kristeva writes in "The True-Real," the truth of "its separability, otherness, death" (236). Barring some literally miraculous intervention it is, therefore, impossible to satisfy one's desire for a complete coalescence of the signifier with the signified. Yet this impossibility scarcely serves to limit our desire for the iconic, visionary miracle.

From this psychoanalytic/psycholinguistic perspective, Pound's general poetic project, and the particular poetic iconicity of "The Return," are marked by an impossible and inescapable desire to transcend the condition of language by linguistic means. The point of iconic technique is to effect an assumption of the Symbolic domain (domain of the signifier as separability, otherness, and death) into the domain of the Imaginary (domain of resemblance and homeomorphism, of coalescence) so as to achieve the *visionary* moment. This poem's intense iconicity provokes in its readers the uncanny effect of a See-ing produced by cadences and rhythms because its iconicity imitates or intimates the satisfaction of our own desire. Although this imaginary *Aufhebung* appears to have a regressive quality, we must remember that for Pound this regression is really a making-new, a renewal, a Renaissance, the return of a timeless and eternal condition, the return of the gods. We must remember as well that this regression bears the

mark of a general human condition. The general nature of the psychical condition encoded in Pound's poem enables us to accept with relative ease his invitation to return to that Imaginary moment wherein a specular image gathers up the body's energetic impulses, drives, needs, rhythms in a shining vision of completion which may be called mystic, iconic, or sculptural.

Yet the invitation is not without risk, since the fundamental impossibility of such a return involves us, as it involves Pound, in a tangle of contradictions. Perhaps the strongest mark of contradiction in "The Return" is the affect of fear and uncertainty which the first two stanzas attribute to awe-ful and "Inviolable" beings. What after all have the gods to fear? Why should they "hesitate" and "half turn back"? The gods' hesitation appears to be a displacement of the poet's own anxiety as to his mastery of technique, his *virtu*. Unable to effect fully a Symbolic manifestation of an Imaginary condition (i.e., to effect the return of the gods), the poet hesitates and half turns back. The affect of fear and uncertainty is properly that of the poet, or the enunciator of the poem, rather than of the "Inviolable" gods, and indicates an apprehension of impossibility at the heart of his poetic-cultural project. Thus the contradictory qualities of the poem may indicate an acknowledgment, but only "half-awakened," of the impossibility of the fulfilled desire—the coalescence of signifier and signified—that the poem's iconicity proposes and attempts.

Even if one could somehow make one's way back to the Imaginary without being shadowed by the impossibility of doing so with Symbolic means, one would still find there an other. The "basically narcissistic relation of the subject to his ego" (Laplanche 210), which is characteristic of the Imaginary, is a *relation*, not an identity or unity. Since the "ego is originally another" (Laplanche 210), the eye seeing its I (seeing itself) sees something other than itself. This otherness inhabiting the Imaginary moment, the visionary moment, the moment of the I's blissful unity, obscurely threatens that I (or that eye) and its bliss and unity. Both the Imaginary eye that sees the Icon of unity and the Symbolic I that would write that seeing are fissured and unstable. Pound's doctrine of masks, or *personae*, offers to turn this situation into a poetic advantage by converting the instability of his own subjectivity into an opportunity to recover lost *virtu*, and amass a kind of cultural capital out of "luminous gists" and the translation or revivification of the voices of the dead. Yet there is no real advantage to such a practice

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(but only a kind of usury) unless there is the "one sign" grounding, justifying, illumination "a lot of signs" (*Cantos* 546).

"In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it."⁹ This is one of the major motifs in the *Cantos*. It implies that despite the forces of darkness that afflict us in this world of time, decay, and history—the forces of obscurity or imprecision that impede the return of the gods and necessitate the generation of "a lot of signs"—there is, nevertheless, some sovereign and luminous substance in which all figures cohere. Yet for this sovereign stuff, this luminous ground, to fully manifest itself all separability, all otherness, and all death, whether in the Symbolic or the Imaginary, must be made to disappear. But this would require a repression of the thesis of castration (which founds the process of signification) so intense as to be a *foreclosure*—a repression so intense as to produce a psychotic moment in which the desired Truth of "the one sign" appears as an objective reality hallucinated as arising from outside the subject.¹⁰ That is, in order to escape an anxiety about the inadequacy of writing (the signifier), or the difficulty of thinking an eternal state of mind that manifests itself, if at all, only in moments (and that anxiety and difficulty are reflected in the troubled hesitation which so deeply marks the first half of this poem), one must posit a signifier that is capable of something even *more* than a relation of identity with its signified. One must posit a signifier that escapes both the Symbolic and the Imaginary. One must posit a signifier which is not merely a signifier, but an objective reality. As Kristeva points out in "The True-Real," a signifier of this sort would be religious and/or psychotic, and would be possessed of the quality of hallucinatory conviction:

Psychosis proceeds by the disavowal of reality [i.e. the truth of the signifier — separability, otherness, death] and demands that the signifier be real in order to be true. (226)

This hallucination [of the true-real, the foreclosed signifier] recurs periodically, in order to indicate, like an icon, an unutterable *jouissance* that endangers the symbolic resources of the speaking being. The hallucinatory icon . . . challenges what may be structured as a language: it obliterates reality and makes the real loom forth as a jubilant enigma. (230)

The failure of the subject faced with the 'pure' signifier . . . is a desire, then, for iconicity, which in extreme cases, is lost in a gaze that has no object: a blinding field of colour and light. (232)

The rhythmic iconicity of "The Return" is only an obscure intimation of the hallucinatory icon of the True-Real. If the gods were really to

return, their manifestation would sweep away masks and words, *personae* and poems, in a blinding illumination that would obliterate every formality (modern subjectivity, modern poetry, modern culture) that Pound values and wished to revitalize. Perhaps this helps to account for the fact that what we see when "The Return" bids us see the gods are rhythmic icons and similes—rhetorical figures, not the figures of the gods themselves.

Although the apparition of the psychotic-religious moment of the True-Real threatens all that Pound holds dear, it is the only guarantee that his desire to renew modern poetry and modern culture might be possible. Thus is the enunciator of this text put in a fearfully contradictory condition: he must negotiate an Imaginary tightrope without falling either into a Symbolic domain which threatens to dissolve the unity of signifier and signified, or into a psychotic condition which, although it would affirm the reality of the truth he seeks, would irrevocably bar him from communicating that truth. The anxiety that necessarily accompanies such a position manifests itself in the poem as a sense of dread: an intimation that to see the gods would indeed be a very dangerous accomplishment.

That sense of dread and danger shows itself in "The Return" not just as that which structures the contradiction by which the poet's fear appears to be that of the gods, but also as a tropism by which the seen/unseeable gods are metamorphosed into seeable "silver hounds":

These were the "Wing'd-with-Awe,"
Inviolable,

Gods of the winged shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
These were the swift to harry;
These the keen scented;
These were the souls of blood.

As Kenner in *The Pound Era* points out, "at exactly the halfway point a single and emphatic rhythmic figure . . . enters and so asserts itself as out of nine consecutive lines to dominate six" (190). We are again in the presence of rhythmic iconicity: a "single," coherent, rhythmic figure appears and "asserts itself" in/against the unstable rhythms of the present. A rhythm becomes an agent breaching the bar between the eternal Imaginary and the temporal Symbolic.

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Granting, with Kenner, iconic agency to the figure
/ 'oo/ 'o/ /

we may examine an effect that has not been noticed before. This will involve the elucidation of a metonymic chain. Yet this elucidation of a rhetorical figure will be at the same time an uncovering of unconscious activity within the "single" rhythmic figure and/or the figure of the enunciator of the poem. What is proposed here is, in effect, a kind of psychoanalysis of /'oo/'o/'. Since we are dealing with a Poundian poetic in which gods, poetic figures, and poets are ideally consubstantial, and/or a psychoanalytic poetic in which one can say pretty much the same thing so long as one remembers that the shared substance is psycholinguistic, the notion of an unconscious possessed simultaneously by a god, a rhythm, a poet, or a reader is perhaps not so odd as it might seem at first.

The section of the poem which is, as Kenner says, dominated by a “single” rhythmic figure is also the site of an uncanny metamorphosis or doubling of the figures of the gods. Here is the field of the single figure:

These were the "Wing'd-with-Awe,"
Gods of the winged shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

These were the souls of blood.

From the demonstrative "These" in line 10 to the "These" of line 18 we shift from the divine to the canine: from "These" *gods* to "These" hounds, these *dogs*. The metonymic leash which joins gods to dogs and transforms gods into dogs actually begins in line 2 with the identification of a metric unit (the spondaic foot) and a divine body part (the slow feet of the gods). From the beginning the enunciator of this poem sees most clearly (as the dense iconicity of "slow feet" indicates) not the full-bodied image of the gods, but feet—their feet, and his metric. This interest in feet returns with the advent of the single and emphatic figure in lines 10 and 12 where, if "Wing'd-with-Awe" evokes an image of something along angelic lines, "winged shoe!" quickly carries the mind's eye back to the gods' feet. There is revealed to our gaze what would move about the feet of the gods—their dogs.

Moving along this metonymic chain (gods' feet . . . metrical feet . . . These-Wing'd . . . winged shoe [feet] . . . silver hounds [dogs]) the gods, so difficult to see straight on (especially in the second stanza, where they are veiled in similes of obscurity),¹¹ undergo a kind of chiasmic

metamorphosis and appear as the more easily visualized dogs. That this metamorphosis occurs primarily in the section of the poem in which the singular, divine rhythmic figure asserts itself seems contradictory. The logic of iconicity would lead us to expect the assertive rhythmic figure to establish the poetic site where the gods appear most clearly, and yet what we see is an animal agency of these beings. What might account for this uncanny canine metamorphosis?

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that the enunciator of the poem is somehow unworthy and therefore fearful of the scene of apotheosis. Despite the excited injunction to "See" the gods, his eyes turn away, his head is bowed, and dogs appear in the gods' place. Being unworthy to see the gods (unable, that is, to translate the Symbolic of poetry into the Imaginary of vision), he rightly fears a wrathful response to this presumption. The dogs, however, are not simply metonymic masks; they are also threatening figures of the gods' wrathful power. Like the hunter Actaeon, who saw what he would but should not see (the naked goddess of the hunt) or the troubadour Vidal (who was transformed, as it were, into a wolf by the power of his lady Loba's name),¹² he is in danger of being transformed into a bestial speechlessness by the apparition of the gods, and then torn apart by dogs—by the unbearable power of the gods which is actually the limitless vehemence of the poet's impossible desire to see the unspeakable and speak.

The fate of Actaeon/Vidal implies the danger to be feared from a direct seeing of the gods of "The Return." Although Pound in his "Religio" indicates that naming the gods is not of primary importance,¹³ we may double-back along the path of this chiasmic metonym and hazard a guess as to which gods "They" might be. One might be Hermes of the "winged shoe," a messenger of Father Zeus, a trickster god, a god of economic exchange, a god of writing, a god of the shifty signifier, a god of the Symbolic order which is founded on the threat of castration. The other might be the goddess Diana, or the Lady Loba, the divine woman who is master of bow and arrow, the woman who transforms her admirers into animals. She is the phallic woman, the denial of castration, the mistress of the speechless beasts.¹⁴ Taken together, "They" (i.e. Hermes, Diana/Loba) are unseeable because they are the scene (the primal seen) of the threat of castration and the limited Symbolic order it founds, and "They" are the scene of the denial, even the foreclosure, of castration and the speechless blinding vision of the True-Real that produces. "They" are a kind of impossible hermaphrodite on the verge of splitting asunder. If there were only the one or the other, the Law of the Father (Hermes) or the phallic mother

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(Diana/Loba), there might be a resolution of the unbearable tension. But for the poet who would *both* "See" and write that seeing, such a resolution is unattainable. The enunciator of the poem is, like Actaeon, on the verge of being transformed into a speechless animal and then split asunder, torn to shreds by hounds which are not really creatures of an objective divine reality, but manifestations of the painful condition of the subject in language.

Rhythmic iconicity mimes this threat of the Poet/hunter's own bestial metamorphosis and violent dissemination when into the field of the "single figure" the energy of the hunt irrupts:

Haie! Haie!

These were the swift to harry;
These the keen scented;

yet rhythmic iconicity immediately appears to control and contain this irruptive energy by regulating it in a repetition of the /'oo/'o/' figure — "These were the souls of blood." In a poem with a superabundance of exclamation points (indicators of a barely contained anxiety), this is the only verse marked by a period. It is as if Pound, with this punctuation mark, sought to gather the energy of the poem together in this line, not expending it in exclamation but tempering it in a declaration which is something of a declaration of faith. Saying that "These were the souls of blood" is to say that "These" dogs/gods are the forms taken by the blood, that is, the driving pulsions and energies of the body. These dogs/gods are the visionary manifestations of the body's inchoate energy: its limitlessly signifying desire seeking a limit in an Icon of divine power.

The apparition of either dogs or gods simultaneously defers and threatens a rending dispersion into the pure play of the signifier or a bestial, speechless obliteration in/by a vision totally beyond the capacity of the Symbolic to contain it. Iconicity is the necessary leash that both joins and separates these gods/dogs, these divine/bodily energies. The driven, energetic rhythms of the body must be leashed to the figural rhythms and Images of the poem by iconicity, for they are capable at any moment of a terrifying release, a *jouissance*, which would destroy the difficult balance between the Imaginary and the Symbolic which appears here held in a poetic *frisson*. These gods and these dogs must become the ominous slow feet of the poem itself in order to give an iconic stability (or "sculptural stasis") to the psychic condition of the enunciator of the poem, who is poised on a threshold between power and terror, between worthiness and worthlessness, between technical

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potency and an immanent speechlessness in the face of a Truth that is too Real for words. No wonder the leash-men—Pound and his readers—are pale!

In order to indicate the persistence and importance of the psychical-poetical scenario of "The Return" in Pound's text, let us look briefly at a passage from Canto XCIII which is a kind of re-writing of "The Return" published some forty-three years later. After a prolonged attempt to discover a practical economy of the True sign (thus his monetary obsessions), after an hysterical embrace of Fascism, after incarceration as a traitor and a madman, this is what the apprehensive desire that trembles in the text of "The Return" achieves:

"mai tardi . . .
 "per l'ignoto"
 and the soul's job? (Ocellus)
 "Renew"

as on the T'ang tub:

Renew

jih 日

hsin

renew 新

Plus the luminous eye

見 chien⁴

the terror of all four-flushers

(Canto XCIII 629-30)

Here the impossible possible of a Visionary writing which lifts the Symbolic into the Imaginary and gestures fearlessly at a True-Real beyond that is affirmed by the Chinese ideograms. Here "The Return" is rewritten, translated, raised up toward a textual paradise, where it becomes "Renew:" an icon of the sun 日 and an icon of a hand holding an axe 斤 chopping at an icon of trees 木. By means of the ideogram, iconicity appears finally to free itself from the recalcitrance of the temporal/physical medium of rhythm and expresses itself in a directly visual mode.¹⁵ If Pound's Chinese is not quite Imaginary writing, it comes very close.

In order to understand this visionary truth one must see it with a "luminous eye" (見) which shares the quality of this truth by being (like the sun 日) both the source of the medium of vision (light) and the visionary's ultimate object. The organ of perception and the object of perception approach the ideal narcissistic relation which is the dream of

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the Imaginary condition. Such a Seeing requires something other than a mere study of Chinese. It requires the skill of a Gaudier-Brzeska who, according to Pound, could read Chinese radicals at sight. Or it requires the "new eye" which Pound sought to create in his readers.¹⁶ If one has attained such a "new eye" one may free one's self from "the terror" that all "four-flushers" ought to feel (and that Pound felt in "The Return") in the presence of the divine.¹⁷

But notice the limitation of even this serene scene of Truth-as-Writing. Notice the way in which Pound (or any poet who declares the write-ability of the Real) remains a four-flusher. We see here that Pound has only four cards with which to convince us that he can show a flush when we notice that the Image of an I/eye-like-the-sun (見) upon a pair of legs is accompanied by a phonetic writing that tells us how to *speak* this *vision*. This Symbolic shadow of an Imaginary writing calls Pound's bluff by revealing the inescapable rending of the visionary moment by the truth of the signifier. When we notice that the visionary (Chinese) writing of "See" (the imperative iconic tone-setter of "The Return") casts a Symbolic shadow—"chien"—which takes the punning form of a (French) *dog*, we might perhaps be forgiven a certain cynicism about the implicit claim to beatitude informing this passage. Yet we would be four-flushers ourselves if we did not admit to taking a real delight in the technical skill of Pound's attempt at the impossible. After all, critical reliance on a vocabulary animated by figures of space and vision indicates the extent to which even the most sophisticated readers share the desire that so powerfully motivates Pound's text.

Between a poetry like "The Return" which is crisscrossed with an irreconcilable and anxiety-producing tension between the nature of language and the supernatural of the Image (or the Imaginary), and a poetry like "Renew" which *appears* to have resolved such tensions and thus to extract its proper See-ers from the "terror of all four-flushers," Pound's text weaves itself. In that tapestry we are liable to find our own Images: structures answering to our own attempts at the unknown, our own desire to write the Truth, our own terror and rage at its impossibility, and our own momentary and beatific visions.

NOTES

¹ See Knapp (56), Hutchins (100), Ruthven (204), and Homberger for a number of brief, predominately appreciative readings.

² "Secondly, I make poems like 'The Return', which is an objective reality and has a complicated sort of significance, like Mr. Epstein's 'Sun God' or Mr.

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Brzeska's 'Boy with a Coney.' " Pound in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, cited in Kenner (1951; 121)

³ See Easthope (104) for a brief discussion of the relation of iconicity and semantic context.

⁴ We may associate the return of the gods with Pound's belief in a possible twentieth-century Renaissance. A Renaissance is possible because, as Pound writes in *The Spirit of Romance*, "All ages are contemporaneous" (8). The availability of all ages is based on a distinction between a "real" time [which] is independent of the apparent [time]" (8). This "real" time is an ideal, eternal, a-historical time. It is gods' time. In "Religio," Pound defines a god as "an eternal state of mind" that becomes "manifest" by taking "form" when a man becomes a god by entering "one of these states of mind" (*Selected Prose* 47). In order to communicate such an eternal, divine mind-state the poet must manifest virtue: "So far as mortal immortality is concerned, the poet need only discover his virtue" ("I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" *Selected Prose* 29). Technique is the decisive means for introducing the "real," divine, virtuous, immortal realm into the world of the "apparent." For Pound, virtuous technique is committed above all to a non-arbitrary relation between signifier and signified: "Technique is the means of conveying an exact expression of exactly what one means" (*Letters* 23).

⁵ "The rhythm form is false unless it belong to the particular creative emotion or energy which it purports to represent" ("Affirmations," *Selected Prose* 375).

⁶ See Mottram and Godden for further discussion of the importance of the notion of the phantastikon and phanopoeia in Pound's phenomenology and poetic theory. That Pound's interest in a visionary sphere surrounding the body, and in the poetics of representing the phenomena seen therein, is aligned with his insistence on precise, non-arbitrary relations of signifier with signified is indicated by his statement in "How To Read" that "In *Phanopoeia* we find the greatest drive toward utter precision of word."

⁷ See *Ecrits*, pp. 1-7, for Lacan's explication of the Mirror Stage. Laplanche's *The Language of Psycho-analysis* lacks Lacan's poetry, but offers a useful clarity. The entries for "Mirror Stage," "Imaginary," and "Symbolic" are particularly pertinent.

⁸ See Kristeva's *Revolution*, especially chapter 6, "The Mirror and Castration Positing the Subject as Absent from the Signifier."

⁹ This motif first appears in Canto XI, p. 51. See *The Pound Era* (343) for a photograph of an instance of one sign (a cross, in this case) grounding a lot of signs (here, stars).

¹⁰ See Kristeva's "The True-Real" for more on foreclosure and the possibility of psychotic disturbances of the Symbolic field. It is also pertinent to recall that Pound, when writing about phanopoeia in "How to Read," claims that "Rimbaud brought back to *phanopoeia* its clarity and directness." This is the Rimbaud who wrote, in "Nuit de L'Enfer," that "*Les hallucinations sont innombrables*," and "*Je suis maître en fantasmagories*."

¹¹ I am, perhaps, slighting the second stanza because specifically rhythmic iconicity is not so strong there. It is, however, a very visual stanza, and I would like to suggest that in reading this image of snow hesitating to fall we picture what is being held back: a world which would appear, after snowfall, as a kind

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of white page inscribed with the signs of objects standing out dark against the snow — a world in which objective reality would appear as if it were writing on a page.

¹² In Canto IV Pound makes the equation between the hunter Actaeon and the poet Vidal.

¹³ "It is better to perceive a god by form, or by the sense of knowledge, and, after . . . to 'think what god it may be'." (*Selected Prose* 48).

¹⁴ The troubadour Vidal, taking to the woods and living as a wolf, is not in fact paying homage to his lady's name (Loba = wolf). His transformation is actually a denial of her name. It is, that is, a denial of her name as mere figure, as detachable and arbitrary signifier, as mark of castration, as Symbolic captation. By literalizing her name — becoming its living icon — the poet attempts a seamless unification of signifier with signified. Thus he denies the thesis of castration or separation upon which signification is founded; he denies the castration of his lady; he effaces the difference between her and himself, sacrificing his speaking humanity in order to enjoy a visionary psychotic metamorphosis and to roam at large in the forest of the True-Real until the hunters and their dogs come to drive him back into the domain of the Symbolic. The story of Actaeon shares this structure, and it is implicit as well in "The Return."

¹⁵ Perhaps there was also another rewriting of "The Return" along the trajectory of the visible. Ruthven (204) cites Pound's description (from *Polite Essays*) of the Abbé Rousselot, a French phonetician who

had made a machine for measuring the duration of verbal components. A quill or tube held in the nostril, a less shaved quill or other tube in the mouth, and your consonants signed as you spoke them. They return, One and by one, With fear, As half awakened each letter with a double registration of quavering.

It is interesting that Pound should have chosen "The Return" as the appropriate poem to be read into a machine that made words visible.

¹⁶ In the passage from *Gaudier-Brzeska* where Pound writes about the "objective reality" of poems like "The Return," he writes this about his poem "Heather":

A Russian correspondent, after having called it a symbolist poem, and having been convinced that it was not symbolism, said slowly; "I see, you wish to give people new eyes." (Cited in Kenner 1951; 121)

¹⁷ A four-flusher is "a person who pretends to be what he is not. He is a phoney or a bluffer. In poker a flush is a potentially winning hand which must contain five cards of the same suit. A player who tries to bluff his way with only four cards of the same suit is, obviously, a four-flusher." (William and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. New York: Harper, 1977. 228.)

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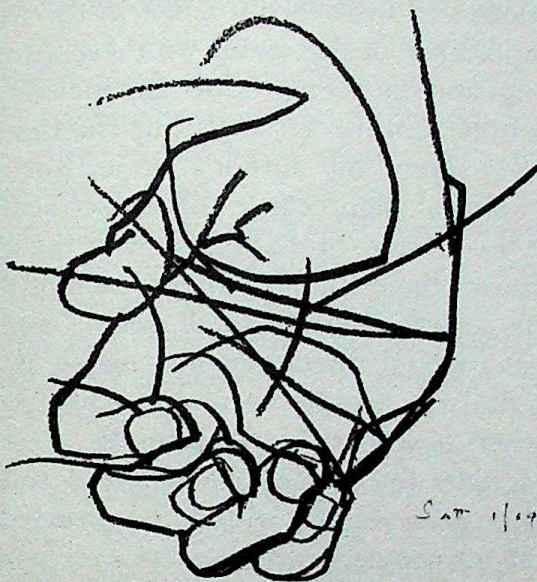
Investing the Cultural Capital of Robert Lowell

JAMES SULLIVAN

A study of the work poetry can do in our culture demands an attention to the material qualities and social functions of the specific performances and publications that disseminate poems. Literary artifacts, the physical objects that make texts available through the senses, bear traces of the ways people have used the texts. And one function of many literary artifacts with overt political orientation—particularly poetry broadsides, a publication format especially common in the 1960s—is to display the name of a poet, preferably a famous poet, to demonstrate the investment of that writer's cultural capital in a specific political position, thus marking the cultural prestige of that position.¹

Artist and printer Lawrence Scott published in January 1969 a limited edition book entitled *4* and an accompanying series of his lithographs on broadsides which display Robert Lowell's endorsement, an investment of his large fund of cultural capital in a specific set of political positions. The book includes four poems he wrote in 1967 and 1968: "The March," "Two Walls," "The Pacification of Columbia," and "R.F.K." (A few months later, these poems would appear in Lowell's collection *Notebook 1967-68*.²) Broadsides of each poem accompany *4*, making a complete set of one book and four broadsides. They are all printed letterpress on laid paper, the book sewn into marbled wrappers. Each broadside is in the same 9-by-19-inch format: at the top of the sheet a lithograph of a hand in some expressive attitude (the one above "R.F.K." is also printed as the frontispiece of the book); below that, in pencil, Scott's signature, the date ("1/69"), and the number out of one hundred; then the text of the poem in an elegant typeface; and at the

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R. F. K.

1923-1968

Here in my study, in its listlessness
of Vacancy, some old Victorian house,
air-tight and sheeted for old summers,
far from the homet yatter of the bond—
is loneliness, a thin smoke thread of vital
air. What can I catch from you now?
Doom was woven in your nerves, your shirt,
woven in the great clan; they too were loyal,
you too were more than loyal to them . . . to death.
For them, like a prince, you daily left your tower
to walk through dirt in your best cloth. Here now,
alone, in my Plutarchan bubble, I miss
you, you out of Plutarch, made by hand—
forever approaching our maturity.

ROBERT LOWELL

A different version of this poem appears in *Notebook 1967-1968* by Robert Lowell. Copyright 1969 by Robert Lowell. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. All rights reserved. (Brown University, John Hay Library, Broadside Collection.)

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bottom, in small capitals, the name "Robert Lowell." The combination of tasteful restraint and insistence implicit in the use of small capitals indicates the importance of that name on these artifacts. On one hand the graphic design and the texts produce the meaning of the broadsides as objects of graphic and literary art: thus the diminished size of the letters that merely report the author's name. But on the other hand much of the cultural significance of these artifacts lies in their association with the prestige of that name: thus the impulse to display it in capitals. Whatever their textual content, each of these broadsides, as artifacts, signifies also "a Robert Lowell poem," and thus disseminates the political and cultural discourses articulated in that formation, a formation that did not necessarily always correspond to the specific intentions or beliefs of Robert Lowell himself.

In recent decades few poets have acquired authority that extends very far beyond, or even very far within, the diverse field of people who read and care about poetry. Lowell was an exception. In the 1960s he had achieved a scope of cultural prestige and authority unmatched by any American poet since. As a member of one of the most prominent families in New England, Lowell was born with a prestige that enhanced his literary reputation with the glamour of aristocracy.³ Because he was a student of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, his cultural capital increased as their model of literary criticism became dominant. The publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 signified his break with that model just as it was ready to fade, thus further increasing his capital by establishing him as major voice of a new poetry.

By the mid-1960s critics were regularly, often hyperbolically, praising Lowell as the pre-eminent American poet of the day. Irvin Ehrenpreis, in his desire to construct a central figure on the literary landscape, went so far as to announce "The Age of Lowell": with the death of Robert Frost, Ehrenpreis predicted that the publication of Lowell's *For the Union Dead* would "establish his name as that normally thought of as 'the' American poet" (182). M. L. Rosenthal could casually introduce an argument by writing, "Take Robert Lowell, our great poet of the middle generation" (69). And Richard Poirier could confidently declare, "Robert Lowell is, by something like a critical consensus, the greatest American poet of the mid-century, probably the greatest poet writing in English." When T. S. Eliot gave his last reading at the Poetry Center in New York, Lowell introduced him, and the elder poet asked the younger one to stay on the stage with him through the reading. Stanley Kunitz interpreted this incident as the moment when the mantle

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of greatness came to rest on Lowell's shoulders: "The request, coming from Mr. Eliot, had the authority of a dynastic gesture" (22).⁴

As a famous author, Lowell could expect attention and respect for his public acts and statements. His name carried weight, but he could not always control its deployment as it and the texts associated with it circulated in the culture. He declared at one point, when he felt his politics had been misrepresented, "I have never been new left, old left or liberal. I wish to turn the clock back with every breath I draw, but I hope I have the courage to occasionally cry out against those who wrongly rule us, and wrongly lecture us" (Lowell and Trilling 19). But such declarations (and there were others, not necessarily consistent with this one) could not entirely control the appropriations of his name and his texts.⁵

A radical student group at Harvard, for example, fixed on his poem "Che Guevara" (*Notebook* 1967-68 26) as a statement of their own revolutionary politics.⁶ Presuming that he was sympathetic to their ideology, they invited him to give a reading. "Che Guevara" may produce quite different readings depending on the reader's ideology, especially when read in isolation from the rest of the *Notebook* sequence. A humanist audience may read its description of the October colors of Central Park—"as the leaves light up, still green, this afternoon, / and burn to frittered red"—as evoking mortality and the swift passage of time, which the season, the news, history, and the "still green" youth of the poet's lover impress on him in the "frittered red" of his middle age. For the radicals, however, those lines, following on the description of Guevara's murder, may have suggested the "still green" youthful vigor of the revolution that continues to "burn . . . red" despite the death of their hero. The phrase, "our clasped, illicit hands," may imply tenderness and sexual guilt to one audience and describe a militant gesture to the other.

At the reading Lowell was introduced as "the great poet of the Revolution"; the audience immediately and, throughout the meeting, repeatedly asked him to read "Che Guevara." He ignored these shouts and read instead from his less overtly political, more personal work. According to his friend Esther Brooks, the significance of this anecdote is that "He had fulfilled his commitment to read but he had not been used" (42). For Brooks, Lowell preserved his integrity, prevented his name and his words from being used to endorse political positions he did not personally accept. Her anecdote constructs him as a forthright liberal in opposition to the fiery "poet of the Revolution" the radicals constructed. Yet the articulation of the names "Robert Lowell" and

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"Che Guevara" in the poem—one a famous and politically outspoken author, the other a newly martyred revolutionary saint—associated for the radicals the high cultural prestige of one with the admired proletarian legend of the other. They saw in Lowell's poem and wanted from his appearance an endorsement of their politics. High culture, it seems, could help validate their beliefs and actions. But although he could publicly reject the use of his name for radical goals and withhold his personal endorsement of the radical reading of his poem, he could not eradicate that reading. The crowd's very frustration indicates that they continued to find their interpretation of the poem appropriate. Whatever Lowell's own politics, he was, for a moment before this audience, "the great poet of the Revolution."

He more successfully managed the use of his prestige when he received an invitation to the 1965 White House Festival of the Arts. His cultural prestige gave him the opportunity and authority on that occasion to embarrass and criticize President Johnson for his foreign policy. Lowell sent copies of his refusal, which registered his protest against the Vietnam War and the United States invasion of the Dominican Republic, to the White House and to the *New York Times*, which, in light of his cultural status and as an implicit sign of their editorial position, quoted it on the front page (Shepard). He told the President (and everyone else) that "every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments."⁷ Like the Harvard reading, the White House Festival might have associated his prestige with political positions he disapproved of. Attending the reading at Harvard, he could renounce the articulation of his prestige to revolutionary politics, but because a radical reading of "Che Guevara" remained possible, he could not eliminate it in that community. His invitation to the White House, however, was based entirely on his personal prestige, not associated with any specific text, and his public stand on the meaning of the Festival committed his prestige to the antiwar movement without any remainder of a multivalent text. He so successfully connected an acceptance of Johnson's invitation to support for Johnson's foreign policies that some of the writers who did attend, such as Mark Van Doren and John Hersey, felt it necessary to use the occasion as a forum to criticize those policies.⁸

Although some of Lowell's public statements indicate that he was skeptical about the efficacy of cultural prestige in politics,⁹ he actively invested it in political events such as the March on the Pentagon in October 1967 to protest the Vietnam War. By that time, such political

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acts as his conscientious objection during World War II and his refusal of the White House invitation were a part of his public image. At a rally on the evening before the march, when Norman Mailer introduced Lowell, Mailer reminded the crowd of the stir the White House snub had caused (Mailer 43). Lowell read them "Waking Early Sunday Morning," and at the end the crowd stood to applaud. According to Louis Simpson, their response only shows that "poetry readings have little to do with reading poetry" (159). The final stanza especially can be read as more resigned than rousing:

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone;
peace to our children when they fall
in small war on the heels of small
war—until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime. (Near 24)

Simpson comments,

It is difficult to see what the crowd at the Pentagon could have heard in this to encourage them. A poem that said it was resigned to having children die in wars around the globe—what could this have to say to war protesters, Civil Rights marchers, and other political activists? This was counsel of despair, if ever there was. . . .

But, of course, they weren't aware of this. They had Lowell there in person—and they had one another. When they rose in a body to applaud it was themselves they were applauding. (160)

According to Simpson's reading of the event, Robert Lowell as public figure was more significant than anything he had to say. His presence at the rally was a sign of the intellectual and cultural legitimacy of their protest and, by implication, the illegitimacy of the Vietnam War. His presence and his reading voice were the marks of his solidarity, the granting of his authority and prestige to their cause.

Certainly the reading was an occasion for the audience to applaud their own moral response as well as the poet's public gesture. But though the poem may seem "resigned to having children die in wars around the globe," it distinctly disapproves. That code of protest, however conflicted with other codes, resonated through the audience. Participants in a mass public event, no matter how well motivated by shared moral conviction and commitment, seldom meld into a single mass consciousness devoid of personal alienation, doubt, fatigue, and

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conflicting motivations. Though listeners usually cannot decode a complex text so efficiently as readers can, the other codes there of moral uncertainty and fear of political impotence may have registered as well. The "great poet" endorsed not only their cause but also the complexity of their engagement in it, lending his intellectual prestige to both their commitment and their ambivalence.

"The March," an account of the confrontation at the Pentagon between the antiwar protesters and the military, describes Lowell's own ambivalence as a participant. The marchers listened to "the remorseless, amplified harangues for peace" at the Lincoln Memorial, and later at the Pentagon, at the end of their march, "heard, alas, more speeches."¹⁰ The political significance of the event lay less in the specific words anyone spoke through a microphone than in the very fact and size of the demonstration. And the crowd, having gathered in part to display their numbers, needed something to do, so they listened. Marching across the Potomac was something more pleasingly active to do, but more risky, since as they approached the Pentagon they would be "met by the other army, the Martian, the ape, the hero, / his new-fangled rifle, his green, new, steel helmet." In the poem, the marchers, "mostly white-haired, or bald, or women," appear weak, dwarfed by overstated state monuments: "the too white marmorial Lincoln Memorial, / the too tall marmorial Washington obelisk, / . . . the too long reflecting pool," not to mention the Pentagon itself. In their submission to hearing still more speeches, the marchers appear weak even in the face of their own movement, which sends them "off like green Union Army recruits / for the first Bull Run, sped," just like those doomed recruits, "by photographers, / the notables, the whores." Lowell felt weak in body and spirit before all this:

sadly
unfit to follow their dream, I sat in the sunset
shade of their Bastille, the Pentagon,
nursing leg and arch-cramps, my cowardly,
foolhardy heart.

He could "see the cigarette match quaking in [his] fingers." Weak as any of us, he offers a model of responsibility beyond hardly anyone's strength. His heart is cowardly and foolhardy as my own; his glasses, slick with the sweat of fear as my own would be, slip down his nose. In the "fear, glory, chaos, rout" of the confrontation, when the MPs "trampled us flat and back," he neither stood his ground nor escaped under his own power, but by the aid of "the kind hands / that helped me stagger to my feet, and flee." In the broadside edition, Scott's

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illustration shows a hand stretched out, palm up, as though asking or offering help. Lowell describes his individual weakness within the group and before the power of the state and his gratitude for personal kindness amid the clash of larger-scale political forces.

Whatever weak political effect Lowell felt he had, his presence lent the prestige of his name to the event. The name Robert Lowell referred not only to a skeptical private conscience, but also to a public figure who was a node of articulation between, on the one hand, certain literary and intellectual traditions and institutions and, on the other hand, the nonviolent protest movements of the 1960s.¹¹ The tactical defeat of the protest mattered less than the publicity it generated for the antiwar movement.¹² News reports, however they represented the size and variety of the crowd and the general thrust of all those speeches, further disseminated and familiarized antiwar discourses (though often in a distorted form) for the news-consuming public. The event required the presence of public figures like Lowell, as sources of both publicity and cultural legitimacy, and thousands of other citizens less well known and as privately unheroic as he. It also required artifacts and texts that would preserve and elaborate the significance of the march in the cultural memory. Norman Mailer's book *The Armies of the Night* is the most well-known such literary account, but Lowell's "The March" has preserved and disseminated a less heroically self-assured perspective, a memory probably more common than Mailer's among the marchers. The mythic remains of the march mattered more than its tactical outcome.

The political use of Lowell's poems implies that the man and his prestige stand approvingly behind that use. The Harvard case shows that such authority can be appropriated without the writer's approval. If "Che Guevara" inflamed the radicals' militant fervor, that fervor carried more authority if they could ascribe it to "the great poet of the Revolution"—that is, to a prestigious author's intention—than if it were only the product of their own subjective reading of a text floating free in the semiotic drift. Jacques Derrida writes that

the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift . . . : by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of "communicating," precisely. One can perhaps come to

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recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains. (9)

This process, by which a text can be repeated in a new context entirely removed from the writer's intent and utterance yet still remain intelligible, made possible the radicals' reading of "Che Guevara." That interpretation persuaded and stirred them because the Lowell name is also detachable and available for reinscription. Its prestige, as a signifier of cultural value, is just as liable to semiotic drift and appropriation as any written text. Grafting the poem into the chain of their own militant discourse, the Harvard radicals also grafted in the author's name and prestige. Brooks's anecdote, however, does not reveal how they felt when Lowell refused to read the poem; her purpose, after all, was not so much to record their response as to graft the poet's prestige to her own liberalism.

Ascribing these meanings to an author—the interpretation of a poem to original intent, the prestige of the name to personal achievement and virtue—gives these meanings their cultural authority. But since name and text are detachable from person and intention, claims to that authority are more secure if they can show an endorsement. At a public event, physical presence or absence is the signature that allows the author to mark endorsement or repudiation of the event's political implications. On a printed document, the authorizing gesture is an autograph: a sign that the writer appeared before and endorsed the artifact as he might appear before and endorse a public event.

Scott published the book and the four broadsides in an edition of one hundred numbered copies without Lowell's signature and twenty-six lettered copies with it but not for sale.¹³ That same month, he published another broadside edition of "R.F.K.": fifty copies on a finer handmade paper, all signed by Lowell. His autograph on 180 of these artifacts implicitly authorizes the other 500. The printed name and the illegible autograph below it corroborate one another, the first making the second legible and the second, by virtue of its similarity to other signatures elsewhere, authorizing the use of the first.

A signature has value as a mark of endorsement because one can compare it to other such marks elsewhere and see that it matches; its value lies in its infinite iterability (Derrida 34). A single autograph, however, would suffice to authorize a whole edition; twenty-six signatures carry no more endorsement value than a single one that imitates Lowell's signature elsewhere. Within each already authorized edition, the limited repetition redirects the value of the autograph from

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endorsement to exchange value. An autographed artifact costs more. As a random example, Black Sparrow Press recently published a hardcover edition of *Medea the Sorceress* by Diane Wakoski in an edition of 400 trade copies, plus 150 signed and dated by Wakoski. One recent bookseller's catalogue offers the unsigned books for \$20 and the signed ones for \$30.¹⁴ Another bookseller has offered a set of unsigned copies of 4 and the four broadsides for \$500 all together and a copy of "R.F.K.," from the signed edition of fifty, for \$300 alone.¹⁵ The mark of the author's physical contact with the artifact is both proof of endorsement and a personal gesture toward the reader, a gesture that mimics intimacy and that has a quantifiable exchange value.

The signed edition of "R.F.K.," published just seven months after the assassination, displays Lowell's signature as a part of the memorial for the dead Robert Kennedy. That personal mark by "our greatest living poet" is a token of the cultural significance of Kennedy's murder and of the honor due his memory. Lowell's poem and signature, the craft and scarcity of the broadside, the fine paper, and the cost are all material investments in the memory of Kennedy. The separate publication of this broadside and the choice of its illustration as the frontispiece of 4 suggest that, of the historical events memorialized in these poems, this one calls for special observance.

Lowell speaks for the general grief, and he speaks as the great writer, as Kennedy's Plutarch with the authority to both memorialize and judge this modern hero. The title above the dates of birth and death rhymes visually with the "R.I.P." of old tombstone and eighteenth-century broadside memorials. The typeface of the title, Goudy Old Style, a light and elegant typeface with diamond-shaped periods, emphasizes the carved-in-stone impression.¹⁶ The "listlessness," "Vacancy," and "loneliness" of Lowell's study in "some old Victorian house, / air-tight and sheeted for old summers" suggest his representative spiritual numbness after the news of the assassination. He emphasizes the suffocation of his emotional state with the three consecutive stressed monosyllables in the phrase, "a thín smóke thréad of vital / air," and the line break that leaves the word "air" isolated between the left margin and a period. His own isolation in this place and the separation of death seem like a quarantine from the harm he feared Kennedy might have done as his political power increased. "What can I catch from you now?" Nothing. From the distance of his "Plutarchan bubble," closed off for now from history by his torpor, the poet can form his judgment. Part of his judgment is grandly tragic: "Doom was woven in your nerves, your shirt, / woven in the great élan;

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they too were loyal, / you too were more than loyal to them . . . to death." But other lines suggest that this mythmaking is a strategy for managing grief for the real man Lowell knew and the public figure others admired: eternalizing Kennedy's fate in a Plutarchan mode brings it under rational control and diminishes the awful contingency of his murder. The comfort of the myth lapses for a moment when a simple statement of loss breaks with the line as if by the strength of the emotion—"I miss / you"—but the text immediately recovers the heroic perspective—"you out of Plutarch, made by hand." The final line preserves a Robert Kennedy "forever approaching our maturity," like a figure on Keats's Grecian Urn. The unexpected pronoun "our" in that line finally insists that Lowell's own grief is not entirely private, but representative of a public for whom he has the authority to speak.

Thomas R. Edwards writes that, in the end, "we see Kennedy from the viewpoint of a 'maturity' his own life never achieved even as we recognize that 'our maturity' is in a way feeble and pitiful compared to the princely potentiality he will now eternally represent" (3). Edwards reads, in the power of the heroic myth, the contrasting weakness of the contemporary American liberal, as represented by Lowell. He also reads "The March" in terms of what he sees as the modern liberal's feeble potential for political action in the face of historical events (212-16). But, as we have seen with the audience response to the ending of "Waking Early Sunday Morning," a poem that, outside the context of its actual use, may seem defeatist and resigned may have more progressive cultural effects in the right context. This broadside offers an opportunity to recognize one's own admiration, grief, and—since many who grieved were, like Lowell, not among the man's political supporters—ambivalence. Although the lines in the illustration have more violent energy than those for the other three broadsides, this broadside is not a call to action, but a site of reflection. The cost, the aesthetic pleasure of beholding the fine print, owning it, perhaps displaying it, and the combined cultural prestige of the names Lowell and Kennedy all invest a concentrated attention, through the text, in the political and cultural implications of the hero status accorded the historical figure of Robert Kennedy.

Scott's autograph appears on every artifact of the series and carries, in itself, less cultural prestige than Lowell's. But as an art convention the artist's signature—along with the quality materials and the evident craft of the production—indicates that this broadside is a limited-edition print rather than a mass-produced poster, the work of an artist rather than a job printer. The cultural status of art dignifies the artifact as an

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object of intellectual aesthetic contemplation rather than as just a medium for the text. Appearing above the poem, below and to the right of the illustration, Scott's signature announces his responsibility for that part of the artifact. His graphic composition precedes any reading of the text and remains afterward as an icon for it.

The poems are a basis for the artist's political expression. The illustration atop "The Pacification of Columbia," for example, shows a hand twisted awkwardly as if held up to fend off a blow. It is a gesture of victimization, and its publication is an expression of sympathy with the rebelling students at Columbia. The students interpreted their own rebellion in various ways, but they generally understood it to signify, among other things, solidarity with the poor and blacks in the United States and with the common folk of Vietnam.¹⁷ Since the gesture in the illustration may apply to the victimization of Vietnamese peasants and nonviolent Civil Rights demonstrators as well as to the students forced out of Low Library by the police, the artifact insists on the connection the demonstrators themselves saw between their rebellion and both racial politics and the war.

Diana Trilling accused Lowell of being one of the "white tourists" and intellectual celebrities at the Columbia uprising who had no committed understanding of the protest but who wanted to enhance their own reputations with the chic of student radicalism (34). Lowell's presence on the campus at that time, in Trilling's understanding of the event, would be more for the purpose of increasing his own prestige rather than the students'. Associating his name with the Columbia uprising, like associating it with Guevara, made him "the great poet of the Revolution"—not a positive thing in Trilling's eyes. Nor in Lowell's. In responding to Trilling, he denied being present at the rebellion (and thus either bestowing or receiving any prestige thereby) and having any connection with it. This was the occasion of his announcement, once and for all, he hoped, that he had "never been new left, old left or liberal" (Lowell and Trilling 19). His reply to Trilling was a delicate management of his cultural authority, an attempt to dissociate it from the methods and the ideology of the rebels but not from their goals.

The graphic context of the broadside places the focus of critique on the violent response of the administration and the police rather than on the student rebels. A hand raised in that protective attitude suggests a word warding off a blow from a police nightstick. The irony of the word "pacification" in the title—a euphemism for the eradication of Communism in the Vietnamese countryside, the violence used to make

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peace—focuses the critique not on those who create disturbances but on those who suppress them and benefit from their suppression. The poem contrasts the multicolored social patchwork, the seductive anarchy of rebellion, with the oppressive solidity of institutional power. It begins with the transformation of the urban mosaic into a transcendent unity:

A patch of tan, then blood-warm roof-tile and tan
patch and sky patch, as the jigsaw flung some mosque of Omar
to vaultless consummation and blue consumption,
exhalation of the sands of the desert to fire.

This vision abstracts the cityscape into its aesthetic essence: as the mosaics resolve into the "vaultless consummation and blue consumption" of high religious art and the numberless sands resolve into the desert's essential fire, the variegated city resolves into—what? A week of revolution was not enough time to find out. Authority, having demonstrated its resiliency precisely in its restoration, appears, as represented in its architecture, more dense and immovable than ever: "the thickened buildings look like buildings out / of Raphael, colossal classic, dungeon feudal." Flung tile cannot move granite and brick. The order restored is no idyll of an organic society: though horses "forage Broadway's median trees, as if / nature [rather than "the thickened buildings"] were liberated," their pasture is a small strip of green that they enjoy today only because of the violence of the night before, and "their grooms" are not Arcadian herdsman but "the police," who mount the horses not to guide flocks but to intimidate crowds. The text never directly mentions the use of force that ended the demonstration, but the last line alludes to it in its thankfulness that the horses and their riders, "at least, have learned to meet and reason together." The hierarchical relation of man over beast, however, is not an attractive model for human society.

"Two Walls" and "The Pacification of Columbia" both bear two dates: one printed in italics below the poem but above Lowell's name ("*April 8, 1968*," and "*May 1, 1968*," respectively), and the other penciled beside Scott's name ("1/69")—presumably the respective dates of the writing and the printing. The April date, in a year fixed in the cultural memory as the year of assassinations, is four days after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., a time of rioting and extreme racial tension. That May Day in the year of student rebellions is one day after police cleared five Columbia University buildings of demonstrators. Beside those evocative dates, the printer's January date appears prosaic.

"Two Walls" does not directly mention King, the rioting, or any

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current event or trend.¹⁸ Rather, it refers to the poet's emotional state more generally "At this point of civilization, this point of the world." Alan Williamson, though he does read its significance in terms of the political aftermath of King's death, notes that the image of the two walls initially suggests a poem more about marriage than about politics:

Somewhere a white wall faces a white wall,
one wakes the other, the other wakes the first,
each burning in the other's borrowed splendor—
the walls, once woken, are forced to go on talking,
their color looks much alike, two shades of white,
each living in the shadow of the other.

Marriage here, Williamson writes, is a relationship of "bored people 'forced to go on talking' by *horror vacui*; a combat in which the roles of aggressor and victim, of autonomous individual and parasite or suppressed 'shadow' have become entangled beyond any hope of clarification" (188). He reads it "not as bourgeois stability but as its opposite: the one encounter so unremitting that it breaks down all our normal and solipsistic ways of conceiving our relationships . . . and forces us to acknowledge the person as beyond our frames of reference, *an other* and *the Other*" (208). In the context of a book¹⁹ and a literary career with many poems about marriage and in the context of the rocky history of Lowell's own marriages, marriage might initially appear to be the ultimate object of attention. But within the context of a series of specifically political broadsides (in which sexual politics does not otherwise figure prominently) and under the drawing of an implicitly bloody red hand hanging or reaching down over the text with its fingers tensely splayed, marriage enters the poem as a metaphor heavily laden with emotional investments, a framework of values for interpreting the political implications of the central image. The broadside context holds marriage, as an implicit image, in suspension, like the walls, deferring its meaning from the beginning of the poem rather than fixing in it and then shifting away. "This point of civilization," April 8, 1968, holds everything in suspension: the glare suspended between the walls, the eternal conflict of marriage, the coincident and conflicting "pursuit / of happiness" among social groups that breeds political conflict.

Even the nature of the current social crisis, the claims and wrongs of the parties in conflict, the moral choices thrust on the citizen, seemed so large and complex that they overwhelm the will to choose, or even to name and describe them. Political choices everywhere seemed to Lowell to dwindle down to revolution or authoritarianism; Gandhian nonviolence no longer seemed to restrain the protest movements; racial politics

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especially was descending to brutality; the universities were tense with the expectation or aftermath of revolt; Eugene McCarthy had little hope of the Democratic nomination, thus leaving the voters a choice between more dangerous ambitions, though he still considered Kennedy "morally [and] intellectually allowable" (Lowell, "Why"); France rumbled with the beginnings of the next month's rebellion; and the war in Vietnam looked like an endless slaughter that no one had the power or will to stop. Lowell may imagine that "Don Giovanni must have drawn sword on such an avenger," creating a moment when defiant hope makes action, if not success, at least possible, but the poet himself is paralyzed, trapped in the anxiety-tight muscles of his own chest: "this morning, skin lumping in my throat, / I lie here, heavily breathing, the soul of New York." All is suspended in his own representative despair. He is the soul of the *polis*, the one privileged, by virtue of his cultural authority, to speak for it, to articulate in himself the culture's anguish and despair "At this point of civilization, this point of the world." He declares his cultural authority as "the soul of New York," a synecdoche for the nation, in the last line just as he acknowledges both his grief and his utter lack of power.

By January, much of what had distressed Lowell and popular perception in general in April remained unchanged or had grown worse. The war continued; peace talks in Paris finally settled such crucial issues as the shape of the table; students in the United States, France, and elsewhere remained restive; the liberal, nonviolent Civil Rights movement seemed to have given way to the more militant Black Power movement; the Soviets had preserved their empire by crushing reform in Czechoslovakia; Kennedy and King were dead; at the Democratic convention in Chicago, populist democracy had appeared in the major news media as anarchy, and state violence assumed the protective covering of orderly political institutions; and, disturbing as anything in the eyes and memories of some, a minority of the voters had narrowly elected Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. As they took office and as the cover story of *Time* magazine confidently declared Nixon's ability "To Heal a Nation," Scott published "Two Walls" and the other broadsides. This document from April, a statement of cultural despair from "our greatest living poet," spoke with as much authority and urgency in the moment of its publication as in the moment of its composition. It is as much Scott's statement about the times in which he wrote the poem. The January date adds Nixon's inauguration to King's assassination as a relevant historical reference point for the

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expression of despair. Lowell's autographs on the twenty-six lettered copies indicate that the poem continued to carry his authority and that he did not, as he did with "Che Guevara," dissociate his cultural authority from the meanings it produced in the new context.

A line in "The Pacification of Columbia" says, "I got the message, one the puzzle never sent." The puzzle produces combinations and effects the puzzlemaker may not have considered, may have even consciously rejected. Poets have little control over the ways people use their poems. In Lowell's case, however, the use of his poetry in the 1960s often accompanied the appropriation of his prestige. Interested parties used his poems to mark their claims to his cultural capital. Since those claims, however, ultimately extended beyond the meanings of the poems, back to the beliefs of the author, Lowell—as a public figure who could appear and speak at public events, or refuse to, who controlled his signature, if not his texts—retained some power to endorse or to void public investments of his cultural capital.

4 and the broadsides are class-bound markers of that investment, available specifically to people acculturated to buying fine print editions. The conjunction here of *haut bourgeois* artifacts with oppositional poetry displays a combination of patrician taste with liberal-left political sympathy. The expense and rarity of the artifacts appeal to a sense of exclusiveness, the printer's craft to a refined sensuality, and the poems (as poems) to a literate sensitivity. The choice of these four poems, out of all those in the *Notebook* sequence, as the textual content of these artifacts focuses Lowell's authority on the political stands he was taking at that time. That distillation endorses that specific set of political tendencies. As a cheap, offset pamphlet (a common medium for protest poetry at that time), that endorsement could appear as mere impotent grumbling against the powerful. But from within an unmistakably high cultural setting, it more securely signifies a shift in whatever cultural authority the arts can bestow away from established institutional powers and onto those who opposed them.

NOTES

¹ On the concept of cultural capital, see Bourdieu. On the figure of the author as a discursive construct open to a variety of appropriations and transformations rather than as merely an identifiable person who wrote a text, see Foucault.

² They appear in that collection in a slightly different form. They were changed slightly again for the revised and expanded edition entitled *Notebook*,

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and yet again for their inclusion in *History*. In each of these books, "The March" appears as two poems rather than as one two-part poem as it does in 4 and on the broadside.

³ For a history of the Lowell family, see Greenslet. For a history that concentrates on the lives and careers of the family's famous poets, see Heymann.

⁴ But some other writers, as different in their ideas about poetry as Donald Hall and Robert Bly, denounced this tendency: "The Literature Industry manufactures truisms like slogans. For years, as we have known that Ford had a better idea, or that Winston tastes good like a cigarette should, we have known that Robert Lowell was our greatest living poet" (Hall 7). "The older poets have all died in the last years; the publishing world feels lonesome without a great poet around. Robert Lowell is being groomed for this post. The result is evil, especially for Lowell" (Bly 93).

⁵ Critics have understood Lowell's politics in the 1960s and 70s in various ways. In a review of *Notebook 1967-68*, Burton Feldman referred to "Lowell's recent, sometimes sensational career as a public man of the radical left" (550). Thomas R. Edwards, however, has found in "The March" evidence of a weak-willed liberalism, one that does the right thing but despairs of any real effectiveness, a tendency, however, which he sees Lowell overcome to produce his finest political poetry (210-25). Alan Williamson sees a richer blend of several tendencies in Lowell's career, including "an Eliot-like conservative's insistence on forms of integrity lost in historical 'progress'; a revolutionary's vision of apocalyptic community and hunger for poetic justice; and a liberal's sharp, impersonal scruples" (2). Steven Gould Axelrod also explores Lowell's political conscience in his works from *For the Union Dead* to *History*, though he resists labeling the poet's positions (134-213). In a reading of *History*, Robert von Hallberg notes that "Lowell's politics were focused on the appeal of imperial and revolutionary cultures: opulence and excitement"; and that *History* elaborates more a complex relation of "judgments and sympathies" than "anything so systematic and impersonal as an ideology" (158). The point is that Lowell's stands were often complex and ambiguous enough to leave Lowell the public figure open to a variety of appropriations by groups and individuals eager either to see their own beliefs validated in the words and deeds of the famous writer or to find a prominent representative of contrasting principles against whom they could sharpen their own statements.

⁶ For an account of this event, see Brooks 41-42.

⁷ For the full text of the note, see Goldman 427.

⁸ For an account of the controversy by the White House staff member who organized the festival, see Goldman 418-75. For accounts of the festival and its political implications by attendants who were sympathetic to Lowell's stand, see Macdonald and Maloff.

⁹ See, for example, Alvarez 42.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise cited, all quotations are from the broadsides.

¹¹ On the concept of nodal points as sites for articulating political communities, see Laclau and Mouffe 112-13. Here, the public figure of Robert Lowell functions this way.

¹² Early in the planning for the march, the organizers imagined the crowd invading and occupying the Pentagon, but by the time of the march itself, that

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goal was revised down to less ambitious, but still mythically resonant, forms of civil disobedience (Mailer 226–30). Also, the presence of both Lowell and Allen Ginsberg helped suggest that the whole range of poetry and its constituencies, from establishment to beat, stood against the war.

¹³ Information about how many copies of 4 were printed and signed is taken from the colophon page of the book. Other bibliographic information about that book and the broadsides is from a photocopy of some entries in an unidentified bookseller's catalogue of unknown date, kept in the same folder as the signed copy of "R.F.K." in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in the John Hay Library, Brown University.

¹⁴ Water Row Books, Sudbury, MA. Catalogue #52, 1991.

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ The titles of "The Pacification of Columbia" and "Two Walls" are also in Goudy Old Style; the title of "The March" appears to be in Palatino, a more energetic yet stately typeface.

¹⁷ According to the Cox Commission report, the student revolt at Columbia had deep roots in the life and policies of the university and in the broader social and political climate, but the immediate grievances were "(A) The projected gymnasium in Morningside Park, which symbolized the shortcomings of Columbia's attitude toward her black neighbors. (B) The University's relationship to the Institute for Defense Analysis, which symbolized complicity with the war in Vietnam. (C) The imposition of discipline upon six SDS leaders, without formal hearing, for breach of the rule against indoor demonstrations" (Fact-Finding Commission 75). For an account by one of the student demonstrators, see Kahn.

¹⁸ The version in *History*, however, begins with the parenthetical note, "1968, Martin Luther King's Murder" (169).

¹⁹ That is, *Notebook 1967–68* or *Notebook*. With the publication of *History*, the marriage poems were removed from the sequence and published separately in *For Lizzie and Harriet*.

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The M'Intosh Mystery: II

JOHN GORDON

As I have argued elsewhere, I think that the mysterious man in the Macintosh of Joyce's *Ulysses* is the ghost of Rudolph Bloom. Briefly, my argument is that repeated testimony in *Ulysses* identifies M'Intosh as a grieving widower and that Rudolph is the only character who qualifies, that Rudolph's having been buried miles away from his wife's grave in the cemetery where M'Intosh first appears, in spite of an expressed desire to be "with her" and go "to her" in death, constitutes a motive for his presence in that cemetery, that M'Intosh's drink of beef tea ("Bovril") corresponds to the blood of slaughtered cattle with which Homer's dead are fed, that his appearance to Bloom and other details of his presentation recall the Hamlet father-and-son encounter which has long been seen as one of the book's central themes, and that there are too many verbal correspondences between M'Intosh and Rudolph Bloom for coincidence (Gordon, *passim*).

In his *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle*, Philip F. Herring has this to say about my case:

One of the latest and most intensely argued of the commentaries on M'Intosh is by John Gordon, who in 'The M'Intosh Mystery' judges this case to be perhaps second only to Milton's 'two-handed engine' as 'the most famous enigma of our literature.' He acknowledges that many attempts to solve the mystery have appeared in print, that skepticism seems to be the orthodox position, that the evidence is 'pretty flimsy,' but he examines it nonetheless. His startling conclusion is that M'Intosh is the ghost of Rudolph Bloom, come from his grave in the west of Ireland to be with his dead wife. He walks around the cemetery in a raincoat, seen by Bloom and others in 'Hades' and 'Oxen of the Sun,' where somebody actually seems to know him, but we are presumably asked to believe that Bloom, who has a

conversation with an imaginary Rudolph Bloom in 'Circe,' repeatedly fails to recognize the ghost of his father. This curious ghost, who eats dry bread and mopes about, is visible, in human form, and yet father and son do not speak or recognize each other.

Gordon combs the evidence with all the ingenuity of a Stephen Dedalus arguing his theory of Shakespeare (the difference being that Gordon seems to believe his theory). The case for Rudolph Bloom is argued with a quality of desperation that attests to his presumed belief that all Joycean mysteries have definitive solutions if one only reads the evidence right.

When someone calls M'Intosh a 'seedy cuss,' we are not told that the meaning of this bit of American dialect is transparently clear, but that 'seedy' is an apt term for a Jewish father, who is a 'cuss' or cursed because he is a suicide. 'Where the deuce did he pop out of?' says someone else, and we are told that 'pop' is a term for father. Bloom's striking down of poppies in 'Circe' is an Oedipal act. That M'Intosh is called 'Dusty Rhodes' cannot be mere nonsense; it must be a clue, and obviously refers to Rudolph Bloom's having been a traveling salesman. He died of poison like Hamlet's father, and so all this is tied into the Hamlet motif of *Ulysses*. (That Hamlet's father was not a suicide is apparently not a problem.) The argument goes that the M'Intosh mystery either can or cannot be solved, and if it can be, then the identity is clearly Rudolph Bloom. No provision is made for authorial mystification, nonsense, humor, or any lack of double entendre—every word is a potential clue if it fits, though not if it doesn't. (112-13)

To which the following. First, I do not call the evidence I present flimsy; the passage in question, "So far, this is pretty flimsy," is used as a transition to the material I consider pretty substantial. Second, there is no reason to believe that anyone in "Hades" besides Bloom sees M'Intosh. (Hynes asks Bloom after "the fellow in the," and Bloom assumes he means the man in the macintosh, but he's probably wrong; otherwise Hynes would not likely have made the mistake which results in the "M'Intosh" of the newspaper account.) Nor is there any reason to believe that Bloom ever gets a good look at M'Intosh's face. He is in his presence not "repeatedly" but twice. The first time he is standing "far back" (*U* 6.824)¹ from the twelve mourners grouped around a grave, of whom M'Intosh is apparently one; even discounting the approximately even chance that M'Intosh has his back to him, and assuming that neither has his head bowed, it remains possible that Bloom's view is obscured. As it certainly could be at the second and last encounter, during the riotous last call at Burke's Pub. In neither of these instances

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can we assume that Bloom sees anything of M'Intosh other than his macintosh; in fact that he never remarks any facial or other feature, or resemblance to anyone, suggests that he does not. In any case it's hardly remarkable that he "fails to recognize the ghost of his father," it being a predictable feature of Joyce's work that people see what they expect to see, that for instance people like Bloom who do not believe in ghosts do not recognize them. (Thus in "Hades" we hear a story of two Irishmen who fail to recognize Jesus Christ because they expect to see Mulcahy from the Coombe. On the other hand in "Cyclops" Alf Bergan, uniquely ignorant of Paddy Dignam's death and burial, meets or thinks he meets Dignam walking the street.) Nor does anyone in "Oxen of the Sun" "seem to know" M'Intosh: rather a medical student stationed at the Richmond Asylum describes him as a perennial visitor in the habit of wandering into the hospital (hence "walking M'Intosh") with his bread (hence "Bartle the Bread we calls him"), muttering over the story of his life and making his peculiar complaint about "a deposit of lead in his penis"—a typical delusion among schizophrenics and other mentally unbalanced people (*U* 14.1548–52). In fact it is remarkable, in Joyce's Dublin, that no one at the hospital *does* know who he is, that like everyone else they can only identify him by his clothes or his mannerisms.

Third, as ghosts go M'Intosh is not at all "curious" just because he "eats dry bread and mopes about"—among his spectral contemporaries are some who eat, drink, and smoke, who take carriages, taxis, and boats, make telephone calls, and so on.² (There was incidentally also one—one of the most famous of the *Ulysses* years—who wore a macintosh.³) Fourth, as to the account of what seem to me M'Intosh-Rudolph echoes: The phrase "seedy cuss in the Richmond" applied to M'Intosh does, I repeat (especially given its "Oxen of the Sun" context⁴), mesh with the Rudolph who was a father, who as a suicide was a cursed soul according to Catholic law, who as someone widely considered to have been demented at the end was a suitable visitor to "the Richmond" Asylum for lunatics. Fifth, it is not "someone else" who asks "where the deuce did he [M'Intosh] pop out of?" (*U* 6.826); it is Bloom, the same who invariably refers to his father as "poor papa." That "pop out of" also suggests the kind of trapdoor effect commonly used for the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost is I think reinforced in "Circe" when M'Intosh "*springs up through a trapdoor*" (*U* 15.1558)—and, again it strikes me as a notable coincidence that in that chapter Bloom should strike down "poppies" while ordering M'Intosh's execution. Sixth, the main reason I find a link between the phrase

"Dusty Rhodes," used to describe M'Intosh at *U* 14.1546, and Rudolph is not that the latter was a traveling salesman (though I think that helps) but that in "Circe," at the exact moment Bloom re-enacts Rudolph's suicide (*U* 15.1960-68), he is wearing "dusty brogues." Seventh, though it's true that Bloom's father was a suicide and Hamlet's father a murder victim, it's also true that those are exactly the two categories of the defunct who according to tradition are most likely to return as ghosts.⁵ That is why, as Bloom recalls in "Hades" (*U* 6.346-47)), the suicide was once buried with a stake through the heart: to prevent any return from the dead.

There are as well a number of other connections not mentioned in Herring's account, among them the echo of Martin Cunningham's "Temporary insanity" (*U* 6.339), used to excuse Rudolph Bloom, with "Trumpery insanity" (*U* 14.1550), the Richmond intern's diagnosis of M'Intosh.⁶ And two other such verbal cues which did not occur to me at the time of the original article: One, of M'Intosh someone remarks, "Here see lost love" (*U* 14.1552), a phrase echoed in Molly's comment that Rudolph "felt lost" when his wife died (*U* 18.1062). Two, Bloom initially describes M'Intosh as a "lankylooking galoot" (*U* 6.805); "galut" is a Hebrew word for "exile," and Rudolph's life has been one of constant wandering, of "migrations" ever farther from the homeland (*U* 17.1907-08).

Which leaves us with a more fundamental disagreement, which stems from the to me extraordinary assumption underlying Herring's "indeterminacy principle" and repeatedly advanced in his book. This is, simply, that what the Joyce industry has not discovered by now in *Ulysses* is not there to be discovered. Ponce de Leon sought the Fountain of Youth in Florida; Florida has by now been pretty thoroughly canvassed and no Fountain of Youth discovered; therefore Ponce de Leon was seeking that which was not, period. For Herring, *Ulysses* has by now been explored in enough detail that the absence of some fabled presence from the charts constitutes *prima facie* evidence of authorial intention to keep it unmapped, to mystify and withhold; hence "the M'Intosh mystery was clearly *intended* to mystify Bloom and thus the reader" (Herring 83).⁷ As some reviewers have remarked, whatever it may call itself, Herring's "principle" amounts to an assertion of certainty beyond any commonly experienced by many of us.

For me, for one, *Ulysses* remains in many regions a dark and indeterminate narrative, full of many things that I still don't get, and don't know for sure if I can or ever will get. Its mysteries are comparable not to fountain-of-youth Florida but to the solution to

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Fermat's Theorem, or neutrinos, or a tenth planet beyond Pluto, or the Loch Ness monster. Do these exist? Like Herring, I don't know. Unlike him, I don't know if I ever will.

Some examples. Does Bloom have a moustache? Very probably, because 1) his daughter once presented him with a moustache cup for his birthday; 2) Frank Budgen's picture of Bloom in *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* gives him a moustache; 3) a quick sketch of Bloom by Joyce himself features a squiggly line in the vicinity of the upper lip; and 4) Gerty MacDowell says of Bloom that he looks like matinee idol Martin Harvey "only for the moustache," (*U* 13.417) and since in the only picture of Harvey I have been able to track down he is clean-shaven, Bloom should be the one Gerty is singling out. None of these items is decisive by itself: Milly's gift is from years ago; Budgen might have exercised some artistic license; Joyce's sketch is ambiguous; somewhere there may well be a picture of a bewhiskered Martin Harvey, and anyway Gerty MacDowell is an unreliable witness. Maybe a smoking gun lurks somewhere, undetected, capable of settling the question beyond doubt. In the meantime, I think that in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, these four points add up to a high degree of probability—say, around eighty-five to ninety percent.

A second example. For a while now students of *Ulysses* have been content to know that Leopold Bloom's birthday is some time in May 1866, because Joyce's notes say so and because *Ulysses* twice confirms them, first in "Eumaeus," where Bloom recalls that he had "just turned fifteen" (actually, sixteen) at the time of the Phoenix Park murders and the immediate aftermath (*U* 16.608), second in "Ithaca," where it is reported that the nova which did in fact appear in May of 1866 was "about the period of the birth of Leopold Bloom" (*U* 17.1125-26). The first event occurred May 6, the second (no one seems to have looked this up before) May 12. The language of these two accounts, though it may frustrate our wish for one fixed date, at the same time allows a good deal of narrowing down. Bloom's birthday was "just" before either the murders themselves (the more probable reading, I think) or the furor that followed: in any case May 4, two days before the crime, seems a reasonable point for the earliest possible date, as does May 12 for the latest. Very likely Leopold Bloom was born on one of the nine days between the 4th and the 12th. Did Joyce have a definite day in mind? I don't know, but recently while working out a passage in "Oxen of the Sun" (*U* 14.1078-1109), I came to the conclusion that Molly and Milly were being presented according to the astrological signs of their birthdays—Virgo for Molly, Gemini for Milly—and that likewise

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Bloom was "Taurus" (U 14.1109), the sign for those born between April 21 and May 20. So. If I'm right, Joyce had it clear in his mind that Bloom was born in a certain month, in the first two-thirds of that month, in (give or take a day) a nine-day subsection of that section. Is there, somewhere in *Ulysses* or in the documentation which supports it, an overlooked item or as yet uncombined combination which would make it possible to go the final step, to single out a definite date, or perhaps to continue narrowing the field through yet another sequence of successive approximations? I don't know. Is it a clue that Bloom last weighed himself on May 12 of this year (U 17.91-99), maybe as part of an annual self-review? I'd like to think so, but I don't know. Is there a definite date, and if so can it be ascertained from available material, and if so will anyone ever ascertain it? I don't know.

In *Ulysses* one deals, usually, not with distinctly demarcated realms of known and unknowable, but with relative degrees of exactness and probability. When I first wrote "The M'Intosh Mystery," I would most likely have put the probability of its thesis at around seventy percent. I'd rate it a good deal higher now, both because in the person of Philip Herring an astute critic has challenged it without, I think, successfully undoing any of its arguments, and because of two new considerations. The first is the realization that "Hades" has not one main classical analogue but two, and that according to one of them Leopold Bloom ought to be encountering the ghost of his father. The Linati schema hints as much, it seems to me, in including "Laertes," Odysseus' father, among the presences in "Hades"—and it's worth noting that once the other names listed have been paired up with their Dublin referents there are very few at all prominent figures other than M'Intosh left with whom Laertes might correspond.⁸ Now, Laertes does not appear in the underworld chapter of the *Odyssey*; nor do Prometheus, Eriphyle, Cerberus, Hades, or Proserpina, all names on Joyce's list for "Hades." Where the last five named of these figures do appear, and where Roman analogues of the other two, Anchises and Tityos, can also be found,⁹ is in the underworld episode of the *Aeneid*, which turns out to rival if not surpass Homer as a source of the chapter's classical echoes and allusions.¹⁰ Thus for instance, in addition to supplying much of the cast of characters, the *Aeneid* is the epic behind Bloom's unconscious reincarnation of Charon in a canal bargeman,¹¹ his vision of mortuary statuary as a crowd of dead souls beckoning with outstretched hands,¹² his fancy that a somnolent bird might be dead,¹³ and his parting sight of the way out: "The gates glimmered in front" (U 6.995).¹⁴

I am of course pointing this out because it is in the underworld

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journey of the *Aeneid* that the hero encounters the ghost of his father. For Joyce, in fact, it seems to have been the major theme of that episode, a point made to fellow Irishman Thomas MacGreevy while discussing the father-son story of *Ulysses*:

It was only when Joyce himself said, ages afterwards, that I was the first person who had ever sensed its significance for him and apropos of it, referred to the importance of the descent into the underworld of Aeneas searching for his father, that I realised the depth of Joyce's preoccupation with the mystery of man's origins. (Dawson 309)

One problem with the correspondence I am suggesting is that according to the same schema which places him in "Hades," Laertes also turns up in "Penelope" (Ellmann, chart), where once again (the other two "Persons" are "Ulysses" and "Penelope"; we know who they are) he is the mystery entry. This presents a complication, but not, I think, any more than that. The connection between Penelope and Laertes is after all clear enough: it was his shroud that she was endlessly weaving and reweaving. Does anything in "Penelope" correspond? This does: "I suppose I oughtnt to have buried him in that little woolly jacket I knitted" (*U* 18.1448). The "jacket" here is the (as it turned out) burial garment—a shroud, in effect—that Molly knitted for "him"—her son, Rudy. Or, to give him his full name, Rudolph Bloom. So: the Laertes of "Penelope" is Rudolph Bloom, named after the Rudolph Bloom who, I think, is the "Laertes" of "Hades."

One remaining complication is the "etc." in the "Laertes, etc." of the Linati schema. Who or what could that be? I don't know, but venture the observation that in a cemetery the one group most susceptible to being summed up in a term for unspecified "others" is the dead, that in "Hades" these dead are often simply "they," lying around in their unnamed numbers, that in the *Odyssey* as in the *Aeneid* the ghosts of the dead appear as unnamed throngs. In any event, Laertes, father of Odysseus, apparently leads the list in "Hades"—a role which in the *Evening Telegraph* report of the funeral read in "Eumaeus" is taken by, it gratifies me to report, "M'Intosh and several others" (*U* 16.1261)—or, as one might say, "M'Intosh, etc."

Finally, I have become more convinced than before that the man in the macintosh is Rudolph Bloom from a general sense that his identity is a "mystery" in precisely the tradition of the genre designated by that word. *Ulysses* was written during the golden age of the English mystery story. One thing that has struck me during an unsystematic survey of the field is how many of the stories generally regarded as classics are in

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effect variants of Poe's "The Purloined Letter." In such works as G. K. Chesterton's "The Invisible Man," Thomas Burke's "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole," Lord Dunsany's "The Two Bottles of Relish," and countless butler-did-it tales, the mystery concerns a crucial clue which is not hidden or encrypted but presented frontally as a routine part of the furniture, in order to be taken for granted and thus overlooked. ("You see," says Holmes to Watson, "but you do not observe.") Might this not, I have been asking myself recently, be the story of M'Intosh as well? With that in mind, I'd like to conclude with a bit of Holmes-and-Watson deduction that I hope will for some suggest a final perspective on this particular mystery.

Q: Well then, what is the single most obvious thing about the man in the macintosh?

A: That he wears a macintosh.

Q: And what obvious thing might that tell us about him?

A: Not much. That he owns one, I suppose.

Q: Yes, of course, but why does he wear it? Why is the man in the macintosh the man in the macintosh?

A: Why is . . .

Q: Hint: For macintosh, read "raincoat."

A: Yes, yes. So along that line a man in a macintosh, that is, a raincoat, wears a raincoat to . . .

Q: Keep off the rain. Quite. He wears it to keep off the rain. Now, let's try this one again: Why is the man in the macintosh the man in the macintosh, that is, *the* man in the macintosh? Why, in one of the world's wettest climates, should a man with a raincoat be any more distinctive than a man with, say, a hat? Why is no one else in *Ulysses* equipped with a raincoat, and almost no one with even an umbrella?¹⁵ There are umbrellas in almost every story of *Dubliners*. Yet when the rain arrives in *Ulysses*, it catches everyone—Mulligan, Bannon, students, pedestrians, even the prudent Bloom, in whose hall are four umbrellas and a waterproof (*U* 4.67, 487), all left behind this morning—without "brollies or gumboots" (*U* 14.483–498, 696–701, 1442; 15.4323–25). Also without macintoshes. Why?

A: That one I know. There's a drought on. It hasn't rained for so long, and the morning of Bloomsday is so sunny that nobody expects rain.

Q: Almost nobody. One person is prepared for the downpour that ends the drought: M'Intosh. What do you make of that?

A: Well, he's obviously peculiar. And wearing a macintosh on a sunny day, during a drought, when there's no sign of rain, is a peculiar thing to do.

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Q: It also turns out to be a smart thing to do, doesn't it? Our friend M'Intosh gets the last laugh when the rains come and he's the only one in the vicinity of Burke's who's ready for them, doesn't he? So again: what do you make of that? How comes it that the one person in Dublin prepared for rain turns out to be right, and everyone else wrong? *How does he know?*

A: Eh? How does he *know*?

Q: Is there any *Ulysses* character who *knows* when it's going to rain?

A: Who knows . . .

Q: The answer is that there is one, and only one, who knows ahead of time when it will rain, who is, so to speak, a barometer to atmospheric changes.

A: Hm? Barometer? Hm. Ah.

Q: Ah.

A: You mean . . .

Q: Precisely. In "Circe," when Bloom, bending down, feels a twinge of sciatica, he fears it may be hereditary. And then, at *U* 15.2783-84, he adds, about his father . . .

A: Bless me, Holmes, you've done it again. Allow me. "Poor dear papa, a widower, was a regular barometer from it."

NOTES

¹ Reference is to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, hereafter cited as *U*. The number before the period indicates the chapter, the number after the period the line, counting from the beginning of the chapter. In citations from *Finnegans Wake* (*FW*), the number before the period indicates page, the number after the period the line, counting from the top of the page.

² "In the past ghosts had certain traditional activities; they could speak and gibber, for instance; they could clank chains. They were generally local, confined to one spot. Now their liberties have been greatly extended; they can go anywhere, they can manifest themselves in scores of ways. Like women and other depressed classes, they have emancipated themselves from their disabilities, and besides being able to do a great many things that human beings can't do, they can now do a great many things that human beings can do. Immaterial as they are or should be, they have been able to avail themselves of the benefits of our materialistic civilization." L. P. Hartley, quoted in Sullivan 1. For a general illustration of Hartley's words, see Cox and Gilbert, *passim*. The collection includes many examples of ghosts who eat, drink, appear during daylight, etc., and one ghost (in "The Hollow Man," by Thomas Burke, Cox and Gilbert 411-20) who wears a macintosh.

³ See Fussell 122 for Edmund Blunden's representative account of a ghostly enemy officer who, wearing a macintosh, shows up behind English lines. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "macintosh" includes this quotation from the July 1900 *Quarterly Review*: "The bodies of officers having been buried in

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macintoshes had not so disappeared." Whether such burial was common I do not know, but in "Circe" (*U* 15.4671-72) the resurrected dead are wearing overcoats, and in *Finnegans Wake* the risen father—whether dead or not can be a matter of interpretation—encounters his son while wearing a "rubberized inverness" (*FW* 35.10), and the fallen Shem sports "a dead warrior's telemac" (*FW* 176.35-36).

⁴ "Seedy" and "seed" invariably carry this innuendo in *Finnegans Wake*, and it is notable that in "Oxen of the Sun," a chapter much concerned with fathers and fatherhood, "seedy cuss" is one of nine variants on the word "seed" used in this sense—almost half of the nineteen occurrences in the whole book. Consider for instance this in "Oxen of the Sun:" "Has he not nearer home a seedfield that lies fallow for the want of the ploughshare?" (*U* 14.929-30).

⁵ See for instance Anderson, especially her reference (232) to "the belief (so often noted by folklorists) that the ghost of a suicide was restless and apt to wander." Several of the ghosts in Cox and Gilbert are suicides. *Hamlet* itself testifies throughout to the proverbial restlessness of the ghosts of murder victims.

⁶ Since my article appeared this reading has been confirmed by Joyce's note:

"trumpery insanity
temporary insanity"

See Rose and O'Hanlon 43. The editors note the echo of the "Hades" phrase in the "Oxen of the Sun" passage.

⁷ Italics in original. N.B.: "to mystify Bloom and thus the reader." "Thus"? "Thus"? Because Bloom is confused about "parallax" we readers are duty-bound never to look it up?

⁸ The Linati list is as follows:

Ulysses
Elpenor
Ajax
Agamemnon
Hercules
Eriphyle
Sisyphus
Orion
Laertes etc.
Prometheus
Cerberus
Tiresias
Hades
Proserpina
Telemachus
Antinoos

(Ellmann, diagram between pp. 187 and 188)
With the help of Gilbert's earlier schema, almost all these figures can be linked to their respective Dubliners, as follows: "Ulysses"—Bloom. "Elpenor"—Dignam (identified by Gilbert). "Ajax"—John Henry Menton (Gilbert).

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"Agamemnon"—Parnell (Gilbert). "Hercules"—Daniel O'Connell (Gilbert). "Eriphyle," killed by her son, whom she then haunts—Mrs. Dedalus, according to Mulligan's version and Stephen's guilt. "Sisyphus"—Martin Cunningham (Gilbert). "Orion," in Homer's Hades driving beasts across the fields of asphodel—the drover encountered on the way to Glasnevin (*U* 6.385–91), goading the cattle toward the river and "killing day." "Laertes etc." "Prometheus"—Jesus Christ, displaying his Sacred Heart like Prometheus his liver, as pondered by Bloom: "Would birds come then and peck . . ." (*U* 6.957) "Cerberus"—Father Coffey (Gilbert). "Tiresias"—aside from Laertes, the one real puzzle of the list. My guess is Reuben J. Dodd, who like Tiresias is bent over with age, walks with a cane, and is always telling people what they don't want to hear. In Rose and O'Hanlon (35), Joyce's notes to "Hades" include the following cryptic lines:

descent (hellenic)
Tiresias — le d.r.s. (Heb)
evokes ghosts

I don't know what "d.r.s." might be, but "(Heb)" suggests a Hebraic Tiresias contrasting with the Greek ("hellenic") questioner. Later on the same page, in a passage concerned with Tiresias, Joyce notes about another seer, "Sybil semitic." "Hades"—John O'Connell (Gilbert). "Proserpina"—Mrs. John O'Connell, prodigiously fertile in the fields of death (*U* 6.746–52). "Telemachus"—Stephen. "Antinoos"—Boylan.

9

Here Tityos, Earth's giant son, lies sprawling
Over nine acres, with a monstrous vulture
Gnawing, with crooked beak, vitals and liver
That grows as they are eaten. . . ." (Virgil, 164)

¹⁰ From Joyce's notes to "Hades," recorded in Rose and O'Hanlon 35:

Descent into Hell
Orpheus, Pollux, Theseus
Herakles, Aeneas

11

On the slow weedy waterway he had floated on his raft coastward over
Ireland drawn by a haulage rope past beds of reeds, over slime,
mudchoked bottles, carrion dogs. (*U* 6.442–44)

12

Crowded on the spit of land silent shapes appeared, white, sorrowful,
holding out calm hands, knelt in grief, pointing. Fragments of shapes,
hewn. In white silence: appealing. (*U* 6.459–61)

Compare:

To the bank come thronging
Mothers and men, bodies of great-souled heroes,
Their life-time over. . . .
There they stand, a host, imploring

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To be taken over first. Their hands, in longing,
Reach out for the farther shore. (Virgil 154)

13

No bird

Could fly above it safely, with the vapor
Pouring from the black gulf (the Greeks have named it
Avernus, or A-Ornos, meaning *birdless*) (Virgil 152)

In Rose and O'Hanlon 35, Joyce translates "Averne" as "birdless:" his note includes the Greek spelling for the word.

14 Cf.:

There are two portals,
Twin gates of Sleep, one made of horn, where easy
Release is given true shades, the other gleaming
White ivory, whereby the false dreams issue
To the upper air. (Virgil 175)

¹⁵ The few exceptions to this generalization tend to prove the rule. William Brayden, editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, Mr. O'Madden Burke (cf. his appearance in "A Mother," *Dubliners*), and Sir Frederick Falkiner all regularly carry umbrellas for ornamental reasons. Similarly, Cashel Boyle O'Connor Fitzmaurice Tisdall Farrell, Dublin's mad pedestrian, always carries his "stickumbrellandustcoat." The umbrella carried by one of the women Stephen sees on the shore becomes, in his "Parable of the Plums," a symptom of old-maidish timidity (U 935-37). The "raincaped watch" of "Circe" (U 15.674) likely began their shift after the weather turned.

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“Fiction in the Wild, Modern Manner”: Metanarrative Gesture in William Golding’s *To the End of the Earth* Trilogy

J. H. STAPE

“Your description would be well enough for a fiction in the wild, modern manner!”

—William Golding, *Fire Down Below*

While moral concern and an interest in exploring generic limits have characterized Golding’s writing since his early fiction of the mid-1950s, his recently completed sea trilogy, comprised of *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989), despite its nearly nine-hundred pages, large cast of characters, and variety of incident, seems a deliberate, almost obsessional, return to earlier meditations on such topics as fiction and history, the basis of an authentic moral self, the nature of social institutions, and the individual’s place in them. The territory Golding set out to explore and claim in *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* remains, then, the bedrock of his matured creative interests. Although his resolve to survey the same large area of moral concern appears to confirm the essentially “conservative,” even possibly static, cast of his imagination, Golding has increasingly asserted an apparently contradictory preoccupation with the nature of representation and the fictive. Thus while the trilogy centrally aims at demonstrating the potential limits of “writing about writing,” its insistent and accumulated detail contrarily affirms the traditional aim of realism in convincing the reader of the “reality” of a created world.

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Uncomfortable, however, with the conventional novel's boundaries, and in his early fiction more a fabulist than novelist, Golding has obviously set himself a new test in writing a tripartite novel and extending—possibly to the breaking point—the journal form of *Darkness Visible*, published the year before *Rites of Passage*. However much this form engages Golding in metafictional playfulness, the journal simultaneously validates metaphor in depicting the stages in Edmund Talbot's gradual development. The evolution of the journal throughout the trilogy marks Talbot's growing social awareness: in *Rites of Passage* he addresses it to a privileged audience of one—his influential and powerful patron-godfather, an aristocrat—whereas in *Close Quarters* he purportedly maintains it for its own interest. In *Fire Down Below* a further stage of awareness is registered as the pretense of keeping a journal is abandoned for the new stance of writing for publication as Talbot's reminiscences, shaped first for a private audience, become a public discourse conceived for and altered by the pressures of mass consumption. In a sense, what these formal shifts mark is the democratization of writing and of the author. The changes also register Talbot's alteration from a priggish, self-confident young self-promoter to the Coleridgean "sadder and wiser" man, one chastened by experience and committed, for better or worse, to accepting and attempting to understand the compromises imposed by a socially constructed world. Golding further implies by this generic transformation how literary activity itself is constrained by its historical and cultural circumstances (Bakhtin's heteroglossia), a conception underscored by the trilogy's constant self-reflexive allusions to drama, poetry, and the novel.

While these formal shifts shape the trilogy's thematics, Golding's choice of register and voice is obviously partly determined by a desire both to imitate and to send up the dominant literary genres of the trilogy's temporal location in the early Romantic period. Thus at various moments late eighteenth-century travelogue à la Smollett or Sterne, for instance, counterpoints Austenian social comedy or the meditative mode of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Self-consciously postmodernist intertextuality in the allusions to Richardson, Coleridge, and Fielding, and pervasive self-reflexive gestures form further layers of complicity, though simultaneously alienating, allusion and illusion. As John S. Whitely has suggested, however, "the links between Golding and the creators of metafiction" can easily be overestimated (190), and Golding's recourse to postmodern techniques is, in the end, less an affirmation of their ideological content than the positing of an awareness that

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significance is inevitably embodied in historically determined and societally validated forms. In this sense the trilogy's metafictional gestures are a corollary to the organizing structures of ritual, an act by which a community periodically restates basic needs to revalidate its "truths."

Thus while the generic playfulness serves, on the one hand, to mirror Talbot's evolving social conscience, Golding's intentions are also polemically based in establishing and sustaining his final vision of utopia deferred. A given genre, a way of seeing, is in the end an arbitrary choice that nonetheless determines all subsequent action and requires constant adaptation to its norms. Talbot's basic adaptive strategy is registered linguistically in his occasionally comic attempts to acquire and master "Tarpaulin," as he calls nautical vocabulary. Learning the precise, traditional language of the sea originates in a naive and largely unconscious desire to understand and control his environment, and as he becomes proficient at "Tarpaulin," a practical and demotic tongue, Talbot gradually becomes attached to and forcibly committed to an awareness of the ship's mechanical and social life. By *Fire Down Below*, as the increasingly hobbled vessel lumbers toward Sydney Cove, his transformation from aloof near-aristocrat to engaged commoner is complete: dressed in the costume and performing the duties of a midshipman, he no longer ironizes about "Tarpaulin" but uses it unselfconsciously and fluently as sign of his integration into the community of the ship.

But his new adaptive capacity, which redefines a range of social, political, and moral allegiances, is (as was his former "aristocratic" self), but another enclosing and delimiting stratagem. Mr. Prettiman and Miss Granham, the avatars of a new social order, teach Talbot that his overly willing adaptation to things-as-they-are undermines the possibility of a truly human community and props up a corrupt status quo. The educational process they offer allows Talbot to discern the seemingly stable and regulated socio-political universe of the voyage's outset to be unjust and arbitrary, and he learns, in part at least, to relinquish his naive assumptions about the rightness of his position at the near-top of the social and political hierarchy as his understanding grows to embrace a knowledge of the basis of the structures that support him. A corollary of this new awareness is his recognition that language is inherently political in its organization and maintenance of social forms. In the end, however, he finds himself incapable of altering his mode of life and systems of belief to challenge the-world-as-it-is, and, ironically, while he had earlier aimed and desired to identify with and validate authority, he

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learns that he has no choice but to do so. His rhetorically charged final question "The world must be served, must it not?" (FDB 313),¹ precipitated by a dream of the Prettimans riding off into Utopia, sadly registers an accommodation to circumscribed "reality," an acceptance, however reluctant, of the forms—linguistic, political, social—inherited by an eighteenth-century upper-middle-class Englishman. The trilogy's concluding optimism lies, however, both in the Prettimans' impossible vision of a new world and in Talbot's consciousness of the terms of his forced compromise. One step ahead of *Free Fall's* Sammy Mountjoy, who begins with and is never quite able to answer his question "How did I lose my freedom?", Talbot by the end of his voyage to the Antipodes knows fully how he has done so.

Golding's thematic interests are further extended by the formal narrative problem. Until he becomes conscious of his engagement in compromise, Talbot's role is as voyeur and witness rather than as participant in the dramas that surround him, a position that consequently enables the Olympian tone of the disengaged and judging narrator. But, classically unreliable, he observes and comments upon half-truths, and thus unwittingly becomes the mirror image of his fellow diarist, the Reverend Mr. Robert James Colley. An even more naive recorder and interpreter, Colley is radically incapable of separating fiction from reality and thus of distancing himself from either. His interpretive failures are derived in part from Protestantism's insistent literalism and its unwillingness to separate form from content, a denial of the existence and validity of symbolic discourse that tragically disallows self-knowledge and self-interpretation. What Colley comes up against is fictiveness, and in mistaking myth for reality and confusing substance with accident he gradually sinks into the self-built hell of solipsism.

While fully acknowledging that self-knowledge remains ever partial and incomplete, Golding also limits the reader's epistemological basis by consistently withholding the means for a more clear-sighted analysis, marking out no-go areas and arbitrary boundaries as fixed as the class markers inscribed upon the deck of the ship itself. In *Rites of Passage* he situates this controlling narrative stance in Captain Anderson's total authority; his whims, personality, and words determine life aboard ship, just as the novelist and his chosen narrative voice control and regulate fiction. Thus, while both Colley and Talbot, who seek to escape Anderson's "narrating" authority, find him an ideological antagonist, other witnesses judge him to be capable and even sympathetic.

The trilogy itself destabilizes narrative authority by relentlessly

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opposing two competing discourses: documentary and spiritual autobiography. The first immerses the reader in a precisely observed external world, the second in a narrative from "below" registering a range of motive and sentiment that is necessarily partial, incompletely observed, and only intermittently comprehensible. At the outset these discourses appear wholly antagonistic, but they increasingly merge as Golding argues the impossibility of maintaining distinct and discrete boundaries. The disintegration of narrative control begins, in fact, almost at the beginning as Talbot's symbolic inscription of "the number 'one' at the top of the page" (RP 3) and his desire to record events are contravened on only the second day out: "I do not know how much I shall set down today. Circumstances are all against careful composition" (RP 11). Indeed, "circumstances" increasingly militate against this as events aboard ship move toward disorder and, momentarily, toward anarchy. And as the voyage progresses toward the symbolic mark of the equator, events can only coherently be inscribed by a dramatic conception and structuring—by a return to a form whose origins lie in communal ritual. Golding's own comments that *Rites of Passage* is "pretty theatrical" and that "the ship had to be turned into a theater" so Colley could "make an exhibition of himself" suggest the self-conscious pursuit of this dominant metaphor (Baker 132). The central incident of crossing the line, the dramatic structure of rising and falling action, and what various critics have observed as persistent theatrical images identify *Rites of Passage* as a cross-generic product, an attempt to lower the boundaries set for the realistic novel.²

The main terms of its dramatic metaphors are "farce" and "tragedy," polarized as "high" and "low" forms, rigorously distinct theoretically, but as with the separation of "high" and "low" social orders this distinctions blurs when subjected to multiple perspectives. Talbot self-admiringly portrays his ludicrous adventure with Zenobia Brocklebank, the ship's doxy, in terms that go "straight back to farce and melodrama—in a word, to the theater!" (RP 103), a framework by which he also organizes Captain Anderson's consultation of the drunken Brocklebank about Colley's state of health: "Now there occurred a scene of farce" (166). His classifying certitudes diminish, however, in the attempt to qualify Colley's "fall": "Is it a farce or a tragedy?" (104), and, in later and fuller knowledge, he decides it was both: "by turns farcical, gross and tragic" (276). The allusion to Ravine (278), par excellence the tragic dramatist of rules and decorum, serves to highlight the degree to which stylization and generic expectations act

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against Talbot's "passage" and, more widely, that of his epoch from an age privileging Reason to the new Romantic sensibility.

The transition for one epoch to another becomes the major thematic and formal interest of *Close Quarters*. Although Talbot announces to Charles Summers that his second journal "is not a continuation, but a new venture" (3), he initially reverts to dramatic conventions as a possible structuring device: "Wanted! A hero for my new journal, a new heroine, a new villain and some comic relief to ameliorate my deep, deep boredom" (8). However, even the rhetoric ironically undermines his generic options, for both the language and the desire are Byronic—"I want a hero," begins *Don Juan*—and circumstances, the discovery of love and confrontation with death, force Talbot to abandon his desire for a controlling theatrical design with its artifice, clarity of plot line, and communal appeal in favor of the newly dominant genre of poetry, personally focused and affectively intense.³ But even poetry, the new order, is at the outset denied empowerment as Talbot alludes to Byron's famous injunction to the ocean to roll on only to add immediately the tongue-in-cheek qualification—"such is the power of verse!" (5).

The title of the second novel of the trilogy, while echoing the final sentence of *Rites of Passage*, shifts attention from public space and communal ritual to the private and intimate, to the "close quarters" where feeling is no longer only observed but personally experienced and registered. This progress from classically Augustan "head" to Romantic "heart" occurs first when Talbot accidentally strikes his head on "the deck so concussively that the whole world was obscured for a moment by a brilliant display of lights" (43), and the movement toward unconsciousness, to alternate and novel ways of seeing and perceiving, culminates when he "falls" in love at first sight: "The lightning that struck the top of the mizzenmast ran down, and melted the conductor . . . the electrical fluid destroyed me. It surrounded the girl who stood before me with a white line of light" (87).⁴ A parody of Romantic vision, either that of Blakean ecstasis or of Wordsworthian "moment of time," this clichéd transformation has as its vehicle an improbably named Miss Marion Chumley, more a literary creation, linked explicitly to Cinderella (127), Juliet (216), and Dryden's Cleopatra (106), than flesh-and-blood reality. In his first encounter with her and in their subsequent conversations Talbot again perceives and experiences life at several removes, encountering it through prior literary texts rather than through direct sensation, just as Colley had replaced the actual

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Billy Rogers with a figure from epic and from pagan and Christian myth in transforming him through his overheated and under-sexualized imagination into a "*Child of Neptune*" (RP 216) and "my own particular hero" (217). If in the first novel Golding places Talbot's failure as one of imagination, in *Close Quarters* it is precisely that function that amply takes its revenge.

Talbot's new-found poetic sensibility and aspirations are pricked and even comically undermined by the arrival on board of Benét, poet, lover, and competent seaman. But whereas Benét manages to combine practical talents with poetic effusions to his lady love, Talbot's previous overvaluation of the reasoning and logical faculties, his innocent trust in language, and his self-confident and single-minded ambition now shift into an equally lopsided sentimentality as he castigates himself: "Men should be poets—I understand that now, Edmund, Edmund, thou scurvy politician!" (91). This opposition between politics and poetry is fully developed in the subplot involving Jack Deverel, who in failing to obey orders gravely endangers the ship. This Byronic rebellion against Captain Anderson's authority concludes in Deverel's transformation into a mock Prometheus when he is confined in chains for having "stolen" the inflaming spirit of drink (one of the trilogy's many fires). Talbot's rebellion against his previous self likewise sees his near complete transformation into a contemporary literary hero: he becomes the "Man of Feeling," a version of MacKenzie's lachrymose title-hero or of Goethe's Werther. Talbot "gets a lump in [his] throat" when thinking of Marion (105) and weeps "tears of understanding" (117)—later qualified in another of Golding's self-consciously anachronistic allusions as "tears, idle tears" (206)—when he hears a commonplace song.⁵ From Man of Reason he falls into sentimental heroics.

The ship's dangerous and precarious balance, however, forces Talbot to right himself and to return to practical matters. His indulgent self-concern is forced to move toward a greater consciousness of lives and experiences outside his own, an emotional extension and growth metaphorically represented by his exploration of the ship's "nether regions" (164), at once a parody of the epic hero's journey to the Underworld and a symbolic penetration. Learning that the ship may be sinking, Talbot has for the first time to come to terms with his eventual death. Coupled with the disorientation of falling in love, this confrontation brings about the insight "that poetry is a matter of enchantment. It is folly but a divine folly" (216). The novel's climactic dream sequence periodically resumes his own unbalanced state. The displacement of Reason, while necessary for his discoveries, puts him in

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danger. Playing Colley's role, he appears "unclothed" before the laughing ship's company and merges with a "She" weeping "Tears of joy" (222), a copulation even more public and ritual than Colley's and one that recalls his ecstatic cry of "Joy! Joy! Joy!" (RP 117) on his discovery of a new anarchic and subversive self living "below" the surface of the one he believes he knows and over which he deludedly believes he can assert control.⁶

The narrative principles of dream become yet another device by which Golding increases both the reader's and the protagonist's awareness. The dream articulates Talbot's unconscious identification with Colley much as his relationship to Summers as well as Captain Anderson's to Benét—"a veritable marine Adonis" (CQ 229) in Talbot's own words—benignly parodies aspects of Colley's attraction to Billy Rogers. Talbot's move into Colley's former quarters, sleeping in the very bed the man died in, completes and makes conscious this identification. His assimilation of the meaning of Colley's shame and death is shown, then, as a necessary stage for the emergence of his new self, a self capable of a larger affective range. But a further confrontation awaits him before this transformation is complete: for while Talbot now recognizes his partial responsibility for Colley's death, both logic and sentiment fail him when he encounters "the horribly unknown"—"something like the crown of a head pushing up through the weed" (257) which surfaces from the depths of the sea as weed is cleaned from the ship's bottom. Various described as "a glimpse of weedy tar and timber" (257), as flotsam, and as a "wooden monster" (259), the event's metaphorical significance is deliberately multiple: it is partly a culminating encounter with the ever-unknown alien in nature, with the fundamentally unknowable in the self (a recollection of Sammy Mountjoy's cellar nightmares), with the phallus that is both origin of life and death, and a glimpse at death, nonmeaning, and cosmic disorder. The incident also prepares for the equally terrifying and only ever partly decoded suicide of Wheeler in Talbot's cabin, an act that eludes and intentionally defies Talbot's and his society's habitual modes of apprehension and that undermines completely the representation of experience and event: "I have tried again and again to put what I saw in logical order but come always to the fact that there was no order but only instantaneity" (262).

With the bursting of Wheeler's brain and the appearance of the monstrous head from beneath the sea, and with his own head continuing to ache, Talbot discovers that his plans for "a political and detached observation of the nature" (269) of men and women

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disintegrate. "Observation," demanding dispassion and distance, becomes untenable, and, head and heart both smarting, Talbot's last gesture in *Close Quarters* symbolizes the need for external perspectives as he grasps Charles Summers's hand in a meaningful gesture of friendship. Events, however, also demand a new form, and the "abrupt ending" (271) of Talbot's journal, a narrative discontinuity imposed by circumstance, argues the subjection of literary form to external "reality" as, unable to control phenomena, Talbot experiences a similar incapacity to fix them in a diary. The last "event" in his journal is appropriately pure comic mimesis: interruption, followed by self-justificatory explanation and a final burst of egotism, give way to self-reflexivity, considerable playfulness about heart and head, and a return to self-consciousness:

What I now think to have been an ingenuous opening of my heart to the page is not without a force which I did not suspect until I came to read it much later. But to return to the head of this paragraph. To add this *postscriptum* seemed the most reasonable solution to my difficulty. (280)

A new generic identity thus emerges as Talbot's journal concludes and he undertakes a third volume, spurred on by the fame Milton offers in *Lycidas*, fittingly the novel's last literary allusion since it explicitly links the trilogy's tendency toward elegiac romance with the classic lament about the writer-priest (in yet another reference to Colley).

The conclusion of *Close Quarters* moves Talbot into public space, and in his story's continuation public more than private pressures dominate and shape his understanding of himself as the naive ambition of being an effective and successful colonial administrator is counterpointed by the Prettimans' visionary program of establishing the Ideal City. Fittingly, too, Golding again shifts generic gears as the "high" forms of tragedy and poetry give way to the newly emergent, democratic, middle-class and socially-centered ones of biography and the novel. In search of a hero at the outset of *Close Quarters*, by its end Talbot must settle for himself as the reluctant, unheroic hero of his own story.

Fire Down Below is dominated by a return to mythic modes as the sense of impending apocalypse accompanies the final action. The novel form becomes here the all-encompassing system for exploring and presenting a secular version of personal and societal salvation. While the tragic mode, then, dominated the images and metaphors of *Rites of Passage*, the opening novel, comic conventions order the last one: Miss

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Branham's marriage to Mr. Prettiman and Talbot's to Marion Chumley, after the generically obligatory threats of dissolution and death, conventionally symbolize new stages of individual and societal consciousness. Not surprisingly, given the thematic program of *Fire Down Below*, history intrudes more directly as the megalomania of Napoleon's grand vision recedes and normative and communal values return.⁷ Ironically, however, Golding counterpoints this myth of increased control and order in the body politic: the momentary triumph of science and technology intervenes to save the ship from flood, only to lose it to fire.

Talbot's increasing emotional maturity is signified by his loss of confidence in the ability of language to register moods. Radically undermined by events and now realizing that no absolutes exist, that even the self is a fiction dependent upon external and prior forms, he settles for a considerably more circumscribed but more conscious contract with the world. The "simple" act of recording having proved impossible, he has discovered the refuge of poetry—broadly, a form attempting to register and organize subjective states, equally temporary. The consequence of this shift is his awareness that literary modes are means that, though they inevitably fail to capture the contours and complexity of existence, nonetheless depict and mediate essences that otherwise lie beyond expression: "Poetry itself is a mystery—so is prose—so is everything—I used to think of poetry as an entertainment. It is more, far more" (91). Talbot's new belief (no more firmly grounded) is enacted in *Fire Down Below* through dream and vision. Much as tears function as a structuring element in *Close Quarters*, in *Fire Down Below* Golding uses sleep and dream to structure Talbot's experiences and eventually to confront the Prettimans' (seemingly) selfless "dream" of a just society. Unable to sleep in the cabin he inherits—the cabin in which Colley and Wheeler willed their own deaths—Talbot must will his own life by recognizing his partial responsibility for those deaths in his failure of imaginative sympathy and thus healingly achieve "the sadness of self-knowledge" (64).

At this point his consciousness is significantly directed outward—first to Mr. Prettiman's physical sufferings, which Talbot unwittingly relieves in a scene of high comedy, and then to a concern with plotting the ship's longitude. As the ship's chronometers become unreliable, Talbot is revealed to be equally, if not more completely, adrift, but the occasion again proves propitious, for it allows his instruction into Mr. Prettiman's vision: "What could be better than ascending from the trivial matter of our exact position on this globe to a contemplation of the universe into which we have been born?" (218). As the Prettimans

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invite him to join their great expedition—not of conquest or, like his own, of colonial administration (the latter an imposition and continuation of outmoded and old forms in new conditions), but of establishing a New Jerusalem in harmony with the imagination:

“Imagine our caravan, we, a fire down below here—sparks of the Absolute—matching the fire up there—out there! Moving by cool night through the deserts of this new land towards Eldorado with nothing between our eyes and the Absolute, our ears and that music!” (219)

The visionary mode, ending social and self-alienation, challenges Talbot to re-form and re-balance his aspirations, and his disinclination to embrace this mode, despite its power and attractiveness, is tellingly registered in linguistic cliché, an abandonment of the imagination before the conventional, the comforting refuge of the formulaic in preference to the perfervid language of dream:

“I suppose the excuse to be presented to the Absolute is that I did and do sincerely wish to exercise power for the betterment of my country: which of course, and fortunately in the case of England, is for the benefit of the world in general. Let that never be forgotten.” (221)

Aware, then, of a possible better world, he rejects it for the exercise of “power” and an extension not of “the Good” but of good, and so confirms his representative status as the average man for whom “the Absolute” remains distanced and overwhelming. Thus in refusing Utopia, Talbot serves to embody Golding’s self-acknowledged “antiutopianism” (“Utopias and Antiutopias” 172).

As the debate over a better world unfolds, the mechanics and politics on which the ship’s life itself depend become ironically unreliable, a point further underlined when Talbot’s senses momentarily deceive him into confusing ice for daybreak (226). Thus, while Golding absolves and even approves of the desire for the security of what one believes one knows, the basis of that knowledge is exposed as illusory. The thematics here repeat those of his early story “Envoy Extraordinary” (1956) in *The Scorpion God* (115–78), where changing the world through invention and the imagination is eschewed since it menaces the established socio-political order. But in *Fire Down Below* even the victory of the establishment remains uncertain as the confrontation with the iceberg is unexplained and inexplicable, a textual and narratorial lacuna that parallels the untold and untellable full story of “what happened” to Colley. Revealed to Talbot in *Close Quarters*, this information is teasingly promised but never disclosed to

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the reader. The reader's "innocent" desire to find out is thus guyed by a narratorial method that, whatever its intermittent complicity, is aggressively deceptive, another aspect of mimesis exploited as a simultaneously metafictional and realist device emphasizing the limits of the tellable.

Having thus thoroughly undermined the representational possibilities of language, Golding nonetheless posits, as an act of faith, that "meaning" exists. It remains, however, essentially incommunicable, an assertion he articulates through the Prettimans. Benighted, they hope to construct a world on the premise that experience possesses a significance that defies the traditional political, social, or linguistic demarcations confining it. Their program for this better world emerges from prior texts—from Pindar and Voltaire. And Golding, while relentlessly scrutinizing this ideological positioning's embodiment in literature and fully recognizing how modern experience disallows it, still yearns for that somehow larger, ineffable, and religious universe embodied in the old tag "the Romantic age." As in *The Inheritors* or "The Scorpion God," likewise set at transitional moments when old dispensations are moving toward collapse and disintegration and new ones are coming into their own, Golding's sympathies ultimately lie with the "beautiful losers," those most relentlessly romantic of romantic posturers.

Golding's persistent and knowingly doomed effort to distance his position in an earlier historic period and a painstakingly described physical locale is, of course, an elaborate and characteristic ruse, and as it nears its conclusion the rhetoric of *Fire Down Below* becomes increasingly nostalgic, less concerned with the "immediate present" than with making sense of an (ever re-enacted) past as the generic imperatives of the *Bildungsroman* assert themselves. Moreover, as these conjoin with the comic novel's future-directed preoccupation with continuity, Talbot is uncomfortably, even pitifully, poised between two discourses that both elude personal control. Hence, Golding turns toward the structuring authority of fantasy and myth to respond to his character's—and his—painful ideological position by the subterfuge of blurring the boundaries that separate the realistic from the fantastic, from the-world-as-it-is from the-world-as-it-might-be. The shift in genre reveals itself as polemical, an act by which Golding argues that writing is inherently a gesture of faith, which even as it longs to limn an intrinsically ungraspable actuality is determined by the past and inevitably engaged in a futile attempt to influence the future. While Talbot cannot himself bridge the gap between the world that "must be served" and that imagined world embodied in dreams, Golding

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persuades that, the authority and the accumulated evidence of logic, history, or *Realpolitik* notwithstanding, fiction can and, indeed inescapably, must attempt to do so—even if in the end, as he is well aware, its destiny is to fail.

NOTES

¹ Where context does not adequately identify the work cited, the following abbreviations are used: *RP* for *Rites of Passage*, *CQ* for *Close Quarters*, and *FDB* for *Fire Down Below*.

² See, for example, Tiger 231 and Simon 261–67.

³ Allusions to Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I, 179 occur in *CQ* 5 and 102.

⁴ The light imagery recurs in Talbot's allusion to *Romeo and Juliet*, I.v.43: "O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" (*CQ* 216).

⁵ For a brief discussion of anachronistic vocabulary and allusion in *Rites of Passage*, see Crompton 130.

⁶ Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes locate Colley's threefold cry of "Joy" in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (117) and Dick sees it as "Dionysian *eleutheria*" (122). Golding may also be echoing Blake's "I cry, Love! Love! Love!", *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Plate 7, 1. 16.1, a poem in which eroticism establishes new perspectives.

⁷ Reviews and earlier critical comment, based on the generalized time scheme of *Rites of Passage*, frequently misplaced the trilogy's temporal setting, which Golding himself has vaguely placed as opening "round about 1812 or 1813" (Baker 161). References to Napoleon's defeat set Talbot's arrival in Sydney Cove in 1814 or 1815, that is, either in the year of his loss of Paris to the Allies or of his final defeat at Waterloo.

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Peter Ackroyd, Postmodernist Play and Chatterton

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Well known in Britain, less generally known in the United States, Peter Ackroyd is representative of a new breed of British novelists who can loosely be termed postmodernist. But, unlike their counterparts in the States, these British postmodernists do not necessarily cultivate radical experimentation, nor do they confine their appeal to an elite, mainly academic coterie. They are capable of producing best-sellers, such as Martin Amis's *Money*. They produce works of fiction that are turned into movies, such as Angela Carter's story "The Company of Wolves," a rewriting of the traditional fairy story of Little Red Riding Hood. They have absorbed the triumphs (and absurdities) of poststructuralism and can utilize those aspects of recent theory that suit their purposes without becoming enslaved by them. They have never lost touch with their readership. But they are clearly distinguishable (and distinguish themselves) from the mainstream of British realist novelists typified by writers like Angus Wilson, Alan Sillitoe, or Margaret Drabble.

Yet none of these less realist novelists belongs to a school or subscribes to a group identity. Peter Ackroyd typically insists on the difference of his fiction from the entire contemporary scene: "Someone said the novels I write really have no connection with the novels of my contemporaries, or even with the period itself. I think that's probably true" (Smith 60). Ackroyd is a peculiar combination. He is of his time and outside it, representative of a newer kind of fictional British writing and yet unique, in rebellion against the mainstream English fictional tradition yet writing in an alternative British strain of his choosing. To illustrate the particular position he occupies in the contemporary field

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of British novelists this article will concentrate on what a number of reviewers consider to be his best novel to date, *Chatterton*. But because this is the first essay (as opposed to reviews and interviews) to be written about him, the first section will be taken up with his earlier career and stated attitudes to the genres of literature which he has produced.

Ackroyd's introduction to postmodern writing came when he won a Mellon Fellowship that enabled him to spend two years from 1971 to 1973 at Yale. He had just been awarded a double first in English literature at Cambridge, a bastion of New Criticism in the F. R. Leavis mold. At Yale he met John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, both poets of the New York school. Ashbery had spent nine years in France and was well acquainted with contemporary currents in French thought. He was also a friend of a number of postmodern artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. After Cambridge this potent new brew went to Ackroyd's head like wine. He quickly absorbed these Americans' disruption of meaning and reference, their exploration of the self-reflexivity of language and art.

Toward the end of his stay at Yale he wrote what he described as "not a scholarly work" but "a polemic," *Notes for a New Culture* (9). The position he takes in it reflects Yale's enthusiastic adoption of contemporary French theory at that time. But, seen in a British context, his assertion that form and language constitute the true subject of contemporary modernism (postmodernism as a term had yet to become fashionable) was inflammatory material. In the book he ridicules F. R. Leavis's belief in the moral force of literature. He also deplores the English subscription to a great tradition of literature (as defined by Leavis) built on a conventional aesthetic which rests on key notions of "subjectivity" and "experience." This old humanistic belief in the referential instrumentality of language, Ackroyd argues, was replaced by the modernist aesthetic. "Modernism is the movement in which created form began to interrogate itself, and to move toward an impossible union with itself in self-identity. . . . Language is seen to constitute meaning only within itself, and to excise the external references of subjectivity and its corollary, Man" (145). But England has insulated itself from "that formal self-criticism and theoretical debate which sustained European modernism" (147). The true line of modernism, according to Ackroyd, runs from Mallarmé and Nietzsche through Joyce to contemporaries such as Ashbery in literature and Derrida and Lacan in theory. Both Ashbery and his fellow poet of the New York school, Frank O'Hara, share "a concern for a language which, although assured and relaxed, manifestly 'says' nothing" (127).

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Ackroyd concludes that England's separation from the mainstream of modernist developments has led to a paucity in English creative writing. "Our own literature has revealed no formal sense of itself and continues no substantial language" (147).

Written in 1973, *Notes for a New Culture* was not published until 1976, by which time Ackroyd was established back in London as the youngest literary editor of the *Spectator*, a weekly magazine. It was reviewed in the influential London *Sunday Times* by Christopher Ricks, a leading professor in English at Cambridge. Professor Ricks was implacably opposed to the irruption of French theory into the field of English studies, and the literary editor of the *Sunday Times* must have known that he was offering a red rag to a bull when he sent the book to him for review. After expressing his exasperation at Ackroyd's attempt "to make out that it [the book] is a lonely oasis when in fact it has a swell of trend buoying it up" (somewhat of a mixed metaphor), Ricks concentrates all his fire on Ackroyd's numerous errors of fact that reflect its origin as the product of a young graduate student who has failed to check all his sources. He mocks Ackroyd's assertion that Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" was published one year before Mallarmé's *Les Poésies*, seeing that Mallarmé was born the same year "Locksley Hall" was published. He castigates Ackroyd for misspelling *Tristes Tropiques* (*Topiques*), *Mauberley* (*Mauberly*), *Revaluation* (*Revaluations*) and other misquotations. "Why all this niggling?" he asks. "Because literary history at present might profit from a long hard look, but only if the look also took a long hard look at itself first." He concludes: "It will be a gloomy day . . . if all that happens is that English disdain-for-theory squares up to Continental disdain-for-fact" (39).

Apart from being upset that Ricks had been able to point out so many easily avoidable errors, Ackroyd was not unduly put out by what was ultimately a refusal to confront head-on the argument of his book. After *Notes for a New Culture*, the next book Ackroyd published was a study of Ezra Pound, one of the modernist giants. *Ezra Pound and His World* (1980), one of a series, came out the year after a less conventional and more personal book that Ackroyd wrote simultaneously, *Dressing Up, Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession*. That combination of the avant-garde and camp places Ackroyd quite accurately outside the mainstream of English culture. He has subsequently said of his eight years as literary then joint managing editor of the *Spectator*, "I'm not what you'd call a *Spectator* person. . . . I don't fit into that particular kind of Englishness" (Appleyard 53). Asked recently what tradition he does subscribe to, Ackroyd claimed to admire the English genius for "a

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combination of melancholy, lyricism and camp" (McGrath 47). Those are the qualities he attempts to embody in his work. "I don't think many other contemporary novelists are working in that vein" (McGrath 47). Clearly he has shifted his position since writing *Notes*, in that he no longer spurns a particular English literary tradition. But he still redefines which one he admires. It is not, he insists in the same interview, concerned with the moral life of adult love and death. Apart from Shakespeare, English "tragedy slides off into excessive horror, or gothic; and there's very little love either, it tends to become parody or sentimentality" (McGrath 47). Reading literature may make you a better writer, he quips, but not a better person. So he still stands opposed to the Leavis school of criticism, and he still cultivates a postmodernist delight in parody and linguistic self-consciousness.

Throughout this time Ackroyd thought of himself primarily as a poet in the American avant-garde tradition. His first published work had been a slim book of poems called *London Lickpenny* (1973), and he published a second small volume of poems, *Country Life*, in 1978. Even Peter Porter had to admit in his review of *London Lickpenny* for the *Observer* that he did not understand most of the poems. Throughout this period Ackroyd saw himself as an experimental poet in the contemporary mode, isolated in England by a general cultural subscription to humanism and realism. The last thing he contemplated during this time was extending his linguistic experimentation to the realm of fiction. Interestingly, since turning to fiction he has stopped writing poetry altogether. But he has noticed that "some of the cadences and the images and the ideas and the perceptions and even the very phrases which occurred in [the] poetry have recurred in the fiction" (CA 3).¹

In 1982 he published his first novel, *The Great Fire of London*. It has many of the unique characteristics that Ackroyd's readers have come to associate with his subsequent works of fiction. Setting out to offer a continuation of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, the novel stages this in contemporary London. A cast of characters attempt to relive parts of the novel—invariably unsuccessfully. The past is unrepeatable. There is the director of a film based on *Little Dorrit* who sets himself the impossible task of re-creating Dickens's London using a contemporary telephone operator, who imagines herself at a séance taken over by the persona of *Little Dorrit*. Other Dickensian characters include Arthur, a dwarf child murderer and Rowan Philips, a gay Cambridge don whom the director hires to write the script. Inevitably past and present become

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inextricably fused when Audrey, indignant at the presence of an actress on the set impersonating Little Dorrit (herself), burns down the set, in the process causing the director's death. That is the fate, Ackroyd considers, that lies in wait for any realist artist attempting to resurrect the past. As he concludes, "This is not a true story, but certain things follow from other things" (169). The entire novel is written in a style that brilliantly encapsulates Dickens's taste for caricature and Dickens's style of writing.

Ackroyd's next novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), won the Somerset Maugham Award for its brilliant reproduction of Wilde's voice and linguistic mannerisms. It purports to be Wilde's journal between August and November 1900 (when Wilde died). The text is sprinkled with Wildean aphorisms that bear comparison with their originals. Ackroyd portrays a Wilde transformed by his public trial and period in prison: "I longed for fame and was destroyed by it. I thought, in my days of purple and of gold, that I could reveal myself to the world and instead the world has revealed itself to me" (2). Ackroyd combines (unacknowledged) quotations from Wilde with his own mimicry of Wilde's voice to invent a highly plausible fictional journal. One critic even claimed that Ackroyd "is sometimes more Wildean than Wilde" (Lewis 40). Ackroyd's impersonation of an earlier writer reflects his belief in the disappearance of the subject in postmodern art. His Wilde writes, "I have discovered the wonderful impersonality of life. I am an 'effect' merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own" (*Last Testament* 2). "Wilde" is effectually bequeathing the interpretation of his life and writings to the likes of Ackroyd. Not only does Ackroyd refuse to offer his readers the consolation of an authoritative narrative position, but he further proceeds to undermine the voice of his impersonated narrator/protagonist. At one point Frank Harris, after reading a section of the journal, says to Wilde, "You have stolen lines from other writers." Wilde retorts, "I did not steal them. I rescued them" (161). Ackroyd here recruits Wilde to justify his own "rescue" of Wilde. As readers we are thoroughly enmeshed in one of Ackroyd's intertextual mazes, in which all literary paths look like one another and none lead to a center, let alone logocentricism.

The next year, 1984, Ackroyd published *T. S. Eliot*, a biography that won him wide applause and the Whitbread Award for Biography. It was written under trying circumstances, as the estate refused Ackroyd permission to quote from any of Eliot's letters or unpublished verse and restricted his citations of the published writings to a legal minimum.

Subsequently Ackroyd claimed that not being able to quote from the letters verbatim made him "much more inventive about how [he] brought him to life" (CA 4). It was natural for him to move from Pound to Eliot, and Ackroyd welcomed the opportunity of examining the makeup of another great modernist and his work, one who owed an extraordinary debt to his American fellow poet. Reviewing Pound's suggested revisions and deletions from the original version of *The Waste Land*, Ackroyd provocatively claims that "Pound mistook or refused to recognize Eliot's original schema and as a result rescued the poetry" (Eliot 120). At the same time Ackroyd expresses reservations over the ambiguous role Eliot played in the advent of modernism. "He helped to create the idea of a modern movement with his own 'difficult' poetry, and then assisted at its burial" (Eliot 239). This position is similar to that he took in *Notes for a New Culture*, where he argued that Eliot's famous dictum about the poet's need to escape from personality does not amount to "'escaping' into, and celebrating language, but rather . . . 'escaping' into a mysterious entity which is himself and yet not himself" (50). In Ackroyd's eyes Eliot ultimately turned his back on the modernist revolution he helped introduce, unlike Joyce, who took the modernist fascination with the world of language to its limits in *Finnegans Wake*.

Yet as a biographer Ackroyd is drawn to a writer like Eliot who hides behind invented literary personae. A gifted literary ventriloquist himself, Ackroyd sees Eliot as one of the great instances of the idea that literary creativity consists largely of the ability to absorb and rearticulate voices from the past. "The character inhabited me," he claimed (McGrath 54). He even wrote the biography "in a style that would re-create Eliot's presence" (Lehman 80). Revealingly he has confessed that in writing the biography he "wasn't concerned with the real Eliot," only with his "creation of an Eliot" toward whom his feelings were those "of an author towards his character" (McGrath 47). Writing about Eliot gave Ackroyd the confidence to employ imitation, quotation and pastiche in his subsequent fiction. "The history of English literature," Ackroyd has said, "is really the history of plagiarism. I discovered that when I was doing T. S. Eliot. He was a great plagiarist. . . . I see nothing wrong with it" (Smith 60).

Ackroyd has some particularly illuminating things to say about the passages excised from *The Waste Land*. "Its first four sections," he writes, "had been introduced by poetry which is as close to parody as he ever got." Nevertheless, he continues, there is a difference between Eliot's use of parody and pure imitation. Eliot's use of parody amounts

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to "the creative borrowing of another style and syntax which releases a plethora of 'voices' and perceptions." So, Ackroyd concludes, "Eliot found his own voice by first reproducing that of others" (117-18). All biography reflects, however indirectly, the personality and obsessions of the biographer. Ackroyd is here describing the process by which he too found his own literary voice—by his creative borrowing of the style and syntax of first Dickens, then Wilde.

The connection between the fiery young author of *Notes for a New Culture* and the biographer of T. S. Eliot surfaces in the latter book when Ackroyd defines biography there as "a convenient fiction" (239). Clearly a writer who believes that the subject is purely a textual construct will be drawn to a poet like Eliot who speaks through an array of "characters" or personae. It was Eliot's later subscription to extra-textual values that led Ackroyd to denounce his eventual betrayal of the modernist revolution. What is of most interest here is Ackroyd's refusal to distinguish between the genres of biography and fiction. Elsewhere, in an interview, he has echoed this conviction that "they're much the same process." He goes on provocatively to suggest that "fiction's often more factual than biography and far more precise," because "biography has to be an act of interpretation. No one ever knows what happened." Both employ the same technical skills in their writing. "There's no reason" even "why you shouldn't use pastiche or parody of the subject's style within the biography" (Smith 59). "I just think of them [biographies] as other novels," he has said elsewhere (McGrath 46). Ackroyd's *Notes*, his biographies, and his fiction, then, are of a piece. They all assume a linguistically constituted universe in which concepts like originality, authenticity, and objectivity dissolve, to be replaced by the iridescent surface of language and its endless reformation in the works of the great wordsmiths of literature.

The biography of T. S. Eliot was followed the next year (1985) by his third novel, *Hawksmoor*. This book won him the Whitbread, Guardian Fiction and Goncourt awards, and made him a figure to be reckoned with on the literary scene, especially in Britain. The novel alternates between chapters set in early eighteenth-century London and those set in the twentieth century. The former concern the architect, Nicholas Dyer, who was charged by Parliament with building seven new churches, churches historically built by Nicholas Hawksmoor, the exemplar of English Baroque architecture. Dyer is a Manichean whose mystical belief in the pervasive power of evil stands opposed to the more established Sir Christopher Wren's subscription to the empirical, scientific, and rational ethos of the Royal Society. Dyer enacts his

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opposition to the spirit of the Enlightenment, his belief in the powers of darkness, by secretly sacrificing to the demonic powers a virgin boy in the foundations of each of his new churches. His modern counterpart, Nicholas Hawksmoor, is a Detective Chief Inspector who is investigating a series of strangulations of boys and childlike tramps that occur on the sites of Dyer's churches. Hawksmoor is Sir Christopher Wren's modern counterpart, whose belief in the power of reason fails to solve the murders. His failure brings him close to insanity, but ultimately he is granted a kind of telepathic insight into the mysteries of Dyer's dark world.

Numerous reviewers of the novel have remarked on the influence of Eliot's vision on Ackroyd's portrayal of London past and present. It is as if Ackroyd were redoing not just the police but London past and present in different voices, transforming his modernist predecessor's disillusioned vision into his own postmodern Gothic rendering of it. One reviewer cited the lines from the last stanza of Section 1 of *The Waste Land* evoking the "unreal city" at dawn with its ghostly figures flowing down King William Street to "where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hour." He comments: "The novel at a crucial point reaches the same mood as well as the identical locale," and suggests that Stetson's corpses are "likewise mimicked in the plot" (Rogers 18). It is natural for a writer who sees no difference between biography and fiction to allow the one book to cast its linguistic and imaginative (if distorted) shadow on the other. There is a passing reference to "hollow men." Dyer has a servant called Eliot. Above all, the numerous parallels constructed between time past and time present in the novel seem to be informed by Eliot's meditation on the same theme in *Four Quartets*. Alan Hollinghurst comments: "What Ackroyd may be saying is that time present and time past are both present in time future, and that the essence of Dyer's possession of Hawksmoor is the simultaneity of experiences centuries apart, to which Dyer's churches are perversely capable of granting access—as all great art may be thought to transcend time" (1049).

Ackroyd has said that when he writes a novel he is "primarily interested in the formal shape of it, the way things are balanced against each other" (McGrath 46). He saw the writing of *Hawksmoor* "as a sort of linguistic exercise" (45), in which the principal task was to construct an intricate web of parallels between past and present. At the level of ideas, Dyer and Hawksmoor begin as opposed to each other's belief in Satanism and rationality respectively and are drawn together by the end of the book. There are numerous topographical coincidences, of which the use of the churches Dyer built are the most obvious. Dyer works at

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the Board of Works in Old Scotland Yard, Hawksmoor at police headquarters in New Scotland Yard. Both live around Seven Dials. Dyer journeys from London to Stonehenge, Hawksmoor from Stonehenge to London. Each of the two characters glimpses his double in passing as a reflection in a glass. Both hear the same children's songs. At the end both protagonists find themselves in Little St. Hugh (the only imaginary church of the seven), both imagine themselves as children again, and confront one another as each other's complementaries:

They were face to face, and yet they looked past one another at the pattern which they cast upon the stone; for when there was a shape there was a reflection, and when there was a light there was a shadow, and when there was a sound there was an echo, and who could say where one had ended and the other had begun? (289)

Ackroyd here puts into practice his finding in *Notes*—that the modernist breakthrough was to show form interrogating itself. In terms of what Gérard Genette calls *histoire*, or story, the ending of the novel is enigmatic, inconclusive, baffling to many of its reviewers. But seen in terms of narration, of its formal organization of parallel motifs and linguistic patterns, it is an artistic triumph.

In all his books Ackroyd is consistent in the way he treats his various subjects. In *Notes* he proclaimed that "the emergence of LANGUAGE as the content of literature . . . has already determined . . . the death of Man as he finds himself in humanism and in the idea of subjectivity" (9). In *The Great Fire of London* Audrey is possessed by the fictional character of Little Dorrit so completely that she starts the fire that consumes symbolically and literally the director of the film for his attempting to re-create Little Dorrit within his art form. Ackroyd's Wilde, as was seen, describes himself as an "effect" merely, a linguistic construct that takes shape only in the interpretative minds of others. In his biography of T. S. Eliot Ackroyd was only concerned with creating "an Eliot." He dismisses the very idea that a historical, coherent composite known as *the Eliot* ever existed.

The same is true of Dyer in *Hawksmoor*. Ackroyd has claimed that his voice "is a patchwork of other people's voices" as well as his own, "an echo from about three hundred different books" that he had read in preparing to write the eighteenth-century portions of the novel. "He doesn't really exist as a character—he's just a little patchwork figure." (McGrath 44). As always, Ackroyd is exaggerating. Nevertheless Dyer is constructed as much from Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* in particular and numerous obscure eighteenth-century treatises on such subjects as gout

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and necromancy as he is from Ackroyd's inventiveness. A perfect example of the way Ackroyd puts together his characters by a combination of intertextual borrowing and personal adaption of those sources was pointed out by Alan Hollinghurst when he reviewed the novel: "Few will recognize that Dyer's chance exclamation, 'Curved lines are more beautiful than Straight,' is an inversion of a dictum in one of Wren's *Tracts*, that 'Strait Lines are more beautiful than curved.'" (1049). Ackroyd's ascription of the opposite of what Wren wrote to Dyer is not simply a clever use of sources but thematically pertinent to the novel's ongoing debate between the doctrine of the Enlightenment and the previous era's subscription to superstition.

In choosing the subject for his next book, *Chatterton* (1987), Ackroyd focused on a cult figure celebrated by the Romantics as the apogee of neglected genius. At first this might seem anomalous in a writer dedicated to the destruction of the humanistic conception of an originating subjectivity. But on reading the novel it becomes obvious that Ackroyd has specifically chosen this Romantic hero in order to demonstrate how the poet disappears into his own texts which survive him. Within the novel textuality rules.

Thomas Chatterton was born in Bristol, England, in 1752. He lived only to the age of eighteen, when he took his own life by swallowing arsenic (whether accidentally or on purpose remains an open question) in a London garret. Given some scraps of manuscript that his mother had found in the muniments room of their local church when he was seven, Chatterton fell in love with antiquity. At the age of fifteen or sixteen he invented a fifteenth-century monk called Thomas Rowley, whose poems he wrote in authentic medieval style that took his admiring readers in. During his last year, when he moved to London, he failed to make a living for himself by writing despite a prolific output. His forgery of the imaginary Rowley's poetry was exposed within a few years of his death, and with it he was quickly transformed into a Romantic emblem of the fate of neglected genius.

Wordsworth devotes an entire stanza of one of his best known poems, "Resolution and Independence," to Chatterton and Burns, both poets who in their youth "begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness." Ackroyd has one of his characters, Harriet Scrope, a modern woman novelist, quote these two lines in a brief section that precedes the opening of the main narrative of the novel. Having just misquoted the Chorus's epilogue from Marlow's *Dr. Faustus* ("Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight"), she

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proceeds to get Wordsworth's word order wrong in an attempt to prove that she can quote correctly when she chooses. Ackroyd is evidently concerned to show from the start of his book that we all appropriate the past for our own purposes and in our own ways. There is no such thing as an objective past, let alone a recoverable figure of Chatterton. Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics had constructed their legend around the recently dead poet, a legend which is itself subject to a sea change by a subsequent age. Ackroyd is intent on undermining the Romantic image of Wordsworth's "marvelous boy," Coleridge's "spirit blest," Keats's "child of sorrow," de Vigny's *poète maudit*, Oscar Wilde's "pure artist." All that survive from the Romantics' elevation of the alienated gifted artist reliant on his innate imagination are the texts, and these are themselves forgeries.

Where *Hawksmoor* employed two distinct time periods, Chatterton has three. The first of these concerns Chatterton's own brief life span and uses late-eighteenth-century patterns of speech. The second centers on the year 1856, when Henry Wallis completed his portrait of a dead Chatterton that was to supplant in the public imagination the only portrait of the poet to have survived from his lifetime. Wallis used as his model the poet George Meredith, whose wife left him for Wallis after the portrait was completed. The third is located in the present with yet another (failed) poet, Charles Wychwood, and his circle of acquaintances that include Harriet Scrope, who plagiarizes the novels of an obscure Victorian writer; Philip Slack, a failed novelist; and Andrew Flint, a novelist and biographer of—no other than Meredith. Clearly Ackroyd wants these three temporal strata to interact and generate meaning by reiteration beneath a surface difference. One of the most obvious ways this occurs is in the parallels he draws between the way Chatterton disappears into his writings and the way Wallis disappears into his paintings. Charles seeks to make his name through the forged writings of a Chatterton who lived on after his own forged death, and is likely to survive only in the novel Philip hopes to write about Charles's theory of a resurrected Chatterton, a theory that has already been relegated to the realm of fiction. Even Harriet loses herself in the maze of intertextual borrowing that constitutes her fictional output. In every case the subject disappears into the work of art.

Why is this? Because the work of art is itself a reordering of other works of art from the past. Texts, seen as Ackroyd sees them in a poststructuralist light, are not the inventions of unique writers of genius, of the artistic imagination at odds with society. Texts are rearrangements of other texts. Chatterton as a subject survives only

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through his writings. In *Notes* Ackroyd quotes approvingly Lacan's dictum: "I identify myself in Language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (139), and concludes, "Language speaks us" (140). Of course Ackroyd is simply agreeing with those French theorists who claim that the notion of what Julia Kristeva termed intertextuality has come to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity. She proclaims that "every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts" (146). Ackroyd expressed a similar conviction when discussing *The Waste Land* in *Notes*:

In their combination these words cease to be a collection of sources . . . they have become a new thing. It is not that they possess a meaning which is the sum of their separate parts, nor that they embody the poet's own voice within a tradition of voices. The words have acquired their own density, and their force comes from differences of diction which, although staying in evidence, are mediated by the life of the whole. The source of this life is language itself. (52)

He gives artistic body to this proposition in a highly intricately plotted novel where none of the many texts and works of art turns out to be the simple product of an originating artist. "Writing," as Ackroyd wrote in *Notes*, "does not emerge from speech, or from the individual, but only from other writing" (61).

Chatterton uses intertextuality to show how it operates. An excellent example of this occurs in a passage in which Chatterton describes the moment when he discovered that he could do more than transcribe the medieval manuscripts he discovered in the muniments room; he could continue writing in the same style on his own: "The very words had been called forth from me, with as much Ease as if I were writing in the Language of my own Age. Schoolboy tho' I was, it was even at this time that I decided to shore up these ancient Fragments with my own Genius: thus the Living and the Dead were to be reunited" (85). Ackroyd employs an anachronistic reference to the fourth line from the end of *The Waste Land* ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins") to underscore the difference between the Romantic cult of "Genius" and the modernist sense of a self in ruins. Besides, it turns out that Chatterton's autobiographical "Account" of his life is a forgery committed by Chatterton's Bristol publisher to revenge himself for slanders against him left behind in Chatterton's papers after his death. So the papers are a bookseller's attempt "to fake the work of a faker" (221). As if this double act of forgery were not sufficient, the reader also knows that the bookseller's faked "Account" of Chatterton's memoirs is

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itself faked by Ackroyd, who spent considerable time in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum reading through Chatterton's papers and other contemporary documents.

Ackroyd has been much admired for his ability to mimic the voices of his seventeenth-century architect in *Hawksmoor*, of his eighteenth-century poet in Chatterton, and of his nineteenth-century wit and writer in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. He, however, claims that it is relatively easy to reproduce these voices from the past. He says this is because "the speech we use today contains or conceals previous levels of speech, from the most recent to the most ancient. They are as it were implicit in modern speech, modern writing, and it only takes a little effort to peel back the layers" (McGrath 46). The modern writer's job is to give free rein to the natural play of language in all its historically layered complexity, just as the reader's role, according to Barthes, whom Ackroyd quotes approvingly, "does not consist of the subjective experience of an object . . . but rather of the relation between one text and another" (*Notes* 114).

In *Chatterton* Ackroyd gives satirical and frequently camp expression to this essentially Nietzschean view of the triumph of the autonomy of language. Andrew Flint, in particular, is constituted as a fictional subject through his endless quotations from mainly classical writers. He even makes fun of his own reliance on quotations, as when he says to Charles, "The years are incorrigible, aren't they? They never cease. Was it Tennyson who said that? No. Horace. Horace Walpole" (75). Flint's inability to respond to life without resorting to the responses of his classical forebears is parodied at Charles's funeral by Harriet despite, or with the help of, her lack of classical learning.

"Exeunt omnes—" he began to say.

"In vino veritas."

She was clearly parodying him, but he did not mind; in fact he welcomed it. He positively invited it. "Dies irae," he added. (177)

Flint welcomes her parody because in this way she becomes a member of his confined/refined intertextual commonwealth. Of course it is only too appropriate that Harriet, nearly all of whose books are prime examples of intertextuality, should enter with such instinctual enjoyment into Flint's intertextual word play.

At the same time Harriet is one of the leading instances of what Harold Bloom has termed "the anxiety of influence," an anxiety felt among writers seeking to deny the influence of their literary predecessors on their own work. In his book of that name Bloom claims

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that among poets "the anxiety of influence is strongest where poetry is most lyrical, most subjective, and stemming directly from the personality" (62). Bloom sees the strong poet in precisely the terms that Ackroyd condemned in *Notes*. The strong poet's "word, his imaginative identity, his whole being," according to Bloom, "must be unique to him, and remain unique, or he will perish as a poet" (71). To create a space for his or her own uniqueness each new writer is forced to misread his literary forbears, to deny his or her indebtedness to the past. Ackroyd uses the key phrase, "the anxiety of influence," at a critical juncture in the novel to represent the guilt felt by all writers forced to appropriate the writings of their predecessors in their work. Charles has just quoted a phrase of Eliot's to Harriet, who has mistakenly attributed it to Shakespeare. She defends herself:

"Well, you know these writers. They'll steal any . . ." And her voice trailed off as she looked down at her trembling hands.

"Anything, that's right." He leant back in his chair, and smiled benevolently in her general direction. "It's called the anxiety of influence." . . .

"And of course it must be true of novelists, too." She paused, and licked her lips. "No doubt," she went on, "there are resemblances between my books and those of other writers."

"You mean like Harrison Bentley?" Charles only just remembered Philip's remark of the previous evening, and now brought it out triumphantly as an indication of his wide reading. (100-01)

Harrison Bentley is the Victorian novelist whose plots Harriet has been plagiarizing all these years. Charles sees nothing wrong with what he considers a perfectly natural act of literary appropriation. In fact he opens his preface to his planned book on Chatterton: "Thomas Chatterton believed that he could explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation and forgery, and so sure was he of his own genius that he allowed it to flourish under other names" (126). How fitting that Charles's defense of plagiarism should itself be a double act of plagiarism. In the first place the opening half of Charles's sentence has been lifted verbatim from the catalogue to the exhibition of Art Brut at the art gallery where Charles's wife, Vivien (cf. Vivien Eliot), works (109-10). In the second place Ackroyd himself is indebted to his own earlier novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, in which he has "Wilde" describe Chatterton as "a strange, slight boy who was so prodigal of his genius that he attached the names of others to it" (67). This in turn is indebted to Wilde's lecture of March 1888 on Chatterton: "He had the artist's yearning to represent, and if perfect

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representation seemed to him to demand forgery he needs must forge. Still this forgery came from the desire of artistic self-effacement" (Ellmann 285).

Ackroyd's plagiarism of his own books does not stop here. When Philip accidentally comes across Harrison Bentley's novels in the library, the first title he reads is *The Last Testament* (a flagrant piece of self-plagiarism), a book in which a poet's wife is discovered by his biographer to have been responsible for writing the verses produced at the end of his life that had brought him eternal fame. This is similar in situation to the discovery within the novel that the painter Seymour's assistant, Merk, has painted all of Seymour's last pictures. Another of Bentley's novels is called *Stage Fire*, in which an actor believes himself to be possessed by the spirits of Kean and other famous performers of the past which results in his own triumphant career on the stage. Of course *Stage Fire* is a sly reference to Ackroyd's own *The Great Fire of London*, in which a character thinks she is possessed by another character from the past. That is not to mention the remark Harriet makes to herself when observing a blind man early in the novel: "'All you need, old man, ... is a circle of stage fire'" (30). Ackroyd appears set on overwhelming his readers in a plethora of unending literary borrowing or plagiarism in which he freely admits his own involvement. Charles, for example, consumes pages of Dickens's *Great Expectations* as he finishes reading them, a trait that Ackroyd told an interviewer was stolen from Oscar Wilde. "That was one of his habits. . . . I use it as a kind of joke. In one of the reviews someone said it was a symbol of what I did with my own fiction—take bits of other people's books and eat them" (Smith 60).

It is significant that when Philip discovers Harriet's plagiarism he casts no blame on her. This stems from his own past attempt to write a novel which he abandoned after some forty pages because they "seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he admired." He is obviously suffering from a bad case of the anxiety of influence. His novel "had become a patchwork of other voices and other styles, and it was the overwhelming difficulty of recognizing his own voice among them that had led him to abandon the project" (70). So long as he subscribes to the romantic concept of originality, Philip is terrified of the spectral world of language. In the library he has a nightmare vision of books that "seemed to expand as soon as they reached the shadows, creating some dark world where there was no beginning and no end, no story, no meaning" (71). It takes Charles's death and the exposure of the forgery of Chatterton's papers to bring Philip to realize that "The important thing is what Charles

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imagined, and we can keep hold of that. That isn't an illusion. The imagination never dies." Even more pertinent is Philip's insistence that he must tell the story in his own way. "And you know," he adds, "I might discover that I had a style of my own, after all" (232). Style, the creative use of language, is ultimately the writer's principal contribution to the world. Just as Ackroyd has found himself as a writer by exposing himself to the writings of Wilde, Eliot, and Dickens, so Philip finds himself by exposing himself to the real and forged writings of Chatterton. Intertextuality is not inimical to writing but an inextricable part of it.

Ackroyd reiterates this position throughout the novel, sometimes in somewhat improbable contexts. For instance, the church leaflet on Chatterton that Philip picks up concludes uncharacteristically: "Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" (58). Yet behind this reiterated message lies a serious comment on the false value that the world attaches to originality and authenticity. The Victorian episodes in which Wallis uses Meredith to pose as the dead Chatterton offer a perfect simulacrum of the world as Ackroyd conceives it in his fiction, fiction which is itself—as Chatterton's publisher says of his forgeries — "an imitation in a world of Imitations" (91). Ackroyd is not adopting a radically idealist view of existence. He readily admits through his character, Meredith, "Of course there is reality. . . . But . . . it is not one that can be depicted" (133). Instead the dead Chatterton is brought to life for succeeding generations by Wallis's realistic depiction of Meredith pretending to be dead. "I see," Meredith observes to Wallis. "So the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery?" (139). Equally the greatest fakery becomes the greatest realism when Harriet's cat, unable to tell the difference, leaps on the stuffed bird decorating her hat and demolishes it.

In Ackroyd's novels not only is art an autonomous world of its own creation, but art spills over into life, usurps it or becomes indistinguishable from it. Meredith and his wife are in the process of separating during the period in which Wallis is using him as a model. Wallis's representation of Meredith as dead carries a prophetic force that leads to the real death of his marriage to Mary. She attributes the failure of their relationship to his endless play-acting: "He is always in masquerade" (160). But that is a simplification of the way art and life become necessarily entangled with one another. During one of their bouts of endless banter while Meredith is posing, he says to his wife: "Tragedy is my forte." She quips back, "And comedy is your vice."

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Ackroyd comments: "It seemed to Wallis that this was some theatrical performance they were displaying for his benefit, but then at the same moment he realized that they were also in earnest" (143). Art irrupts into life repeatedly in this book, blurring the boundaries between reality and mimesis. The scene of Chatterton's death is rehearsed three times in the novel. First comes the painted reconstruction of it by Wallis. Next comes Charles's death, where he dies in exactly the same posture in which Wallis painted Chatterton. Finally comes Ackroyd's own imaginative reconstruction of Chatterton's death. In the *New York Review of Books* David Lodge took Ackroyd to task for using "his authority as a story-teller to decide the historically undecidable mystery of Chatterton's death" (16). But the whole point of this novel is to assert the supremacy of the verbal imagination over the irretrievable world of facts. Lodge might have kept in mind Charles's revelation after reading a whole range of mutually contradictory biographies of Chatterton: "It meant that everything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true" (127).

The novel as a whole is structured to reflect this essentially deconstructive view of the world seen through contemporary spectacles. The book is divided into three parts. Part One entails the discovery first of the painting of a supposedly fifty-year-old Chatterton and then of manuscripts of his (including a poem by Blake) that Flint dates as early nineteenth century. Essentially Part One questions the authenticity (a dangerous word in Ackroyd's vocabulary) of both painting and manuscript. Part Two confirms the authenticity of Chatterton's continued forgeries of poets like Blake. Part Two is an extended meditation on the authenticity of artistic forgery, using Wallis's faked death scene of Chatterton as its principal extended (possibly over-extended) metaphor. Part Three, half the length of the other two parts, ingeniously deconstructs the whole concept of authenticity. Harriet's response to discovering that the painting of the older Chatterton is a fake is to attempt to fake its restoration only for the painting to completely dissolve in the course of removing its anachronistic details. Similarly, after Philip has learned that the Chatterton manuscripts are forgeries he proceeds to start writing a book based on the imagined assumption that they are authentic. Part Three celebrates the dissolution of the distinctions between authenticity and forgery, originality and imitation, reality and its representation in art. It ends with the historical Chatterton anachronistically imitating Wallis's representation of his death—down to the unlikely smile on his dead face.

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Ackroyd shares the poststructuralists' distrust of history as something recoverable. He takes a stance similar to that adopted by Hayden White, who ridicules the traditional attempt to authenticate historical and other such discourses by checking them for their fidelity to the facts, because, as White writes, "the discourse is intended to constitute the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as a fact* in the matters under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted" (White 3). Harriet puts this viewpoint succinctly to Philip when she admits that none of the story concerning Chatterton's survival beyond his supposed death made much sense: "None of it seemed very real, but I suppose that's the trouble with history. It's the one thing we have to make up for ourselves" (226). Did not Chatterton make up the past, invent the Middle Ages in eighteenth-century terms, just as Wallis invented his own version of Chatterton's death scene in 1770 in essentially Victorian terms? Equally Ackroyd's Chatterton expresses a twentieth-century postmodernist view when he confesses, "So the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho' I knew that it was I that composed these Histories, I also knew that they were true ones" (85).

Ackroyd's vision is essentially atemporal; past and present interact in the moment. Or you can say that the present consumes the past. Charles jokingly tells his son that he is "eating the past" when licking the dust from the forged painting off his finger (15). Ackroyd has said, "We can live only in the present, but the past is absorbed within that present so that all previous moments exist concurrently in every present moment" (Appleyard 54). Chatterton offers an intricate demonstration of how the past continually surfaces in present-day speech and actions. Chatterton's life and writings radically affect the subsequent lives and work of Wallis, Meredith, Charles, and Philip. Just as contemporaries of Chatterton found his supposedly medieval poems more historically authentic than some actual medieval verse, so Mary Meredith finds her husband less real than either Wallis's representation of him on paper or his own poetic writing. The past can best be recaptured by the imaginative act of the artist, not the painstaking researches of the historical scholar. As Karl Miller has put it, "Human history is 'a succession of interpretations,' a piling-up of imitations, an accumulation of metaphor which will be received as reality" (17).

Ackroyd's attitude to the past, then, is one he shares with postmodern artists and thinkers at large. The past is unrecoverable, being constantly amalgamated into contemporary experience to suit the

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needs of that experience. Ackroyd's lack of interest in historical fact, his acceptance of history as a discourse subject to linguistic play just as are other more overtly imaginative discourses, has led Denis Donoghue to argue that Ackroyd's novels are not historical novels at all. They are "historical romances, because they refuse to discriminate between the life a character apparently lived and the other lives he or she performed." He goes on to argue that Ackroyd "seems to reject the implication, in the historical novel, that people coincide with themselves and settle for the one life which the decorum of historical narration gives them" (40). Certainly Ackroyd's novels refuse to differentiate between historical fact and imagined fact, between Chatterton the poet who wrote the Rowley poems and Chatterton the poet who wrote some of Blake's poems. Each Chatterton lives and writes as vividly. There is no narrative bias favoring the "historical" over the invented poet.

But "historical romance" is both too confined and too derogatory a label to affix to his fiction. Ackroyd has said of all his historically situated novels, "My own interest isn't so much in writing historical fiction as it is in writing about the nature of history as such. . . . I'm much more interested in playing around with the idea of time" (CA 3). For him the world and its past are constructed within language. Language does not reflect any external sequence of cause and effect. Language produces its own similarities and differences, its own parallels and patterns. And these are what fascinate Ackroyd. The past resolves itself into a series of texts which themselves interact, bringing past to bear on present and occasionally present to bear on past—or at least the past as it is textually constituted in and by the present. So Charles comes to glimpse the same (or is he?) child in the house that Chatterton attempts to help just before he dies. Is this the same child painted by Seymour (or should it be Merk?) that Harriet is convinced she has seen before? Charles's son visits the Tate Gallery after his father's death and sees his father lying on the bed in place of Chatterton (who at any rate is Meredith). Meredith dreams that he passes Chatterton on the stairs, just as Charles has a vision of Chatterton in the park. In the final page Chatterton recalls these meetings as his corporeal existence is ending and reflects, "I will not die, then" (234). Evidently he will live on in future representations of him such as those painted by Wallis or passed on from Charles to Philip. But he will live on in the invented image of Wallis's portrait, dying not with the grimace produced by the effects of arsenic but with the smile that both Wallis and now Ackroyd bestow on him. He has entered the free play of art, the web of language.

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Does *Chatterton*, then, qualify as a fully fledged postmodernist work of art as defined by Fredric Jameson?

Postmodernism . . . ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts—such is the logic of postmodernism in general. (96)

Not entirely. The fact is that *Chatterton* displays, as has been shown, a structural patterning, a carefully ordered division between three sections, that disqualify it from Jameson's definition of postmodernism as a work allowing the flow of signifiers. Ackroyd might well be problematizing such signifiers as "the authentic" or "the original," but he subordinates the resulting free play between, say, "the authentic" and "the forged" to an aesthetic structure that contains that free play within its confines and limits the problematization of meaning.

This does not imply that Ackroyd is a half-hearted postmodernist. Rather it undermines Jameson's over-neat categorization of the postmodern phenomenon. For instance, Ackroyd's scrupulously impartial narrative stance artistically embodies the postmodernist assumption that the subject disappears into the work of art. As William Pritchard has pointed out, each of Ackroyd's fictions "refuses to put forth a central, reliable narrative voice that stands up and delivers judgments about life, that is firmly anchored in a particular historical time" (39). The sections recounting Chatterton's eighteenth-century life are told entirely from Chatterton's focus. There is no attempt to distance the reader from Chatterton even indirectly by the use of irony. Similarly the Wallis-Meredith sections are recounted by an unobtrusive narrative voice that employs vocabulary (but not spelling or punctuation) suited to the historical period. Ackroyd wants to disappear into his own work of art, leaving a seamless garment that is both a patchwork of various cloths and yet invisibly sewn together. The only subject allowed to surface in the novel is a textual construct. Even the unification of the three strands of narrative in the book is achieved by a textually contrived and wholly imaginary meeting of Chatterton, Wallis, and Charles at the end that transcends temporal logic by bringing the latter two back in time to join Chatterton at the moment of his death. Imaginary closure is achieved by purely fictional means, means that defy any attempt to read the novel in a mode of realism. The ending celebrates the triumph of art and the autonomy of the literary work over the contingencies of life.

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Ackroyd went on to write another novel, *First Light* (1989), a pastoral comedy combining gothic horror, science fantasy, and camp satire. Its defiant mixing of genres and its range of wildly divergent voices testify to Ackroyd's continuing postmodern belief in the supremacy of language. This was followed by his massive biography *Dickens* (1991). Once again Ackroyd has written a biography in the belief that "there is no truth to tell." He asserts that "because Dickens was such a large figure, such an amorphous figure, he takes whatever shape you want him to take." He hopes "it will read like a novel" (McGrath 46-47). But he does include five Interludes in which he conducts imaginary conversations with Dickens, Dickens has imaginary conversations with the literary pillars of Ackroyd's own writing career—Wilde, Eliot, and Chatterton—or with some of his own characters, and Ackroyd recounts a dream he had about Dickens. It is clear that throughout his writing career to date Ackroyd has remained consistent to the principles he outlined in *Notes for a New Culture*. In *Dickens* he continues to demonstrate obliquely the truth of what he asserted with such assurance at the start of his writing career: "Once language has retrieved its history, it emerges as its only subject, it is literature, it is about 'nothing'" (59).

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Dreaming of Design: Reading Denise Levertov

RONALD R. JANSSEN

You are alone
forming darkness into words
dark on white paper
(*CEP* 109–10)

To begin just here is to mark a plausible originating moment in the reading of Denise Levertov's poetry, as inscribed within the work itself, a moment familiar to anyone who has written anything that draws upon buried resources, a working point from which to probe a few dimensions of a model of the poetic enterprise: the writer (it is not she, but another, under observation) in solitude, engaged in a process of formation whose product, words, bears the imprint, darkness, of the source.

The poem cited here is called "A Ring of Changes," roughly midway in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, published in 1960, Levertov's third American volume, and her fourth volume overall. (The poem is later collected in *CEP* 106–10.) In fact, the passage is a more literal rendering of a moment from a poem that precedes this volume by fourteen years, aptly titled "Interim" (*CEP* 4), where we find the darkness and the paper of our first passage conflated into the "black page of night." Also, the writer's stance is somewhat more passive in the earlier formulation, where "words will spring from darkness now . . . to fill the hollow mind/laid still to hear them."

The change from the receptive stance ("mind/laid still") to the active ("forming darkness into words") would be not an abandonment of one position in favor of another, but a recognition of difference. In "A Testament," published in the same year as "A Ring of Changes," Levertov begins by characterizing poets both as "instruments on which

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the power of poetry plays" and as "*makers, craftsmen*" (PW 3), positions she would elaborate a few years later in "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse": "Poems come into being in two ways. There are those which . . . seem to appear out of nowhere, complete or very nearly so" and "poems that are hard to write" (PW 25).

In both "Interim" and "A Ring of Changes" the words proceed from darkness. Similarly, in "The Wife" the speaker imagines her husband "plucking/truth from the dark surrounding nowhere" (CEP 114). This darkness is an unspecified elsewhere. Although it is treated as a space, it is neither clearly separated from nor integrated with the self that writes, though logic, expectation, and evidence suggest the latter. It might be described as a space, an elsewhere, opened *within* the self, an indwelling otherness with which the self communes. It may be memory or conscience or the unconscious.

In the fifth section of "A Ring of Changes," the section from which our first passage is taken, we find two people, the writer and the speaker, in a room, a space, listening to a radio broadcast of a concert by Pablo Casals, whose instrument, even, is another space: "The cello is hollow . . . /The space of the cello is shaped." A space within a space, and more: "there is space in us"—

but the lines and planes of its form
are what we reach for and fall,
touching nothing (outside ourselves and yet
standing somewhere within our own
space,
in its darkness).

This space, whose darkness the writer forms into words, is everything, repeated everywhere, both inside and outside, the object of striving ("what we reach for") and the lure of tragedy ("and fall"), real but intangible ("touching nothing"). This room, the section concludes, is "the living-room, the work-room" (108-10).

Thus, in this originating moment, space repeats space, and a poem, in an elegant phrasing, is "the proper space/holding existences in grave distinction" (80). In "The Vigil" the poet writes of waiting for the "animal god" that "with its claws opens/Chinese boxes" (98). And in "The Room" the poet proposes an elaborate network of mirrors to give access to a world "beyond my own glance":

With enough mirrors within
and even without the room, a cantilever

supporting them, mountains
and oceans might be manifest.

But even here she perceives the danger that "I could encounter my own eyes too often" (99). In "The Offender" the eye is the human focus, the perspective point, of space, "the prince of solitude," that resides "luminous/in its box of ebony." What appears to be "space beyond it, time/extending to the mountains" may in fact only be "the world in the lustre of a/black pupil" (CEP 91-92). If the position of the writer alone, forming darkness into words, is thus constraining, even solipsistic, still she can say in "The Room," "I don't want to escape."

This may be making acceptance out of necessity. In "Dream Cello" from *A Door in the Hive* of 1989—nearly half a century after "Interim" and four decades after "A Ring of Changes"—the poet will speak of the cello's "music out of 'nowhere'" and ask, without answering, "Invisible hive, has it no small door/we could find if we stood/quite still and listened?" (DH 104). In another poem in the same volume, the poet can entertain the idea of "the borderland—that's where, if one knew how,/one would establish residence." The imagery of the poem is that of painting, and this "interface" is "the edge/between impasto surface . . . /and fictive truth," a site from which "one *almost* sees/what lies beyond the window, past the frame, beyond . . ." (85, emphasis mine). This place of "exquisite balance," and the impossibility of maintaining it, are known by this late date as "The Life of Art." There is, the poet says in "Into the Interior," "no alternative to the/one-path man" (P 135).

If there is to be no easy or direct access to the beyond, one wants to ask what lies within the originating darkness, against what forces one strives to write of anything other than the self, and what the nature of this writing will be. The inquiry is lent relevance by the persistence over the years of Levertov's own interest in these same questions, beginning with the dark region itself. In our rationalistic culture and our post-Freudian, post-Jungian era, certain answers come ready-made, but we will want to clear our minds and look along with Levertov as she inspects the darkness itself.

One dimension of the darkness is constituted by its emotional component. In "A Ring of Changes," for example, we know at least that the darkness seems to cause the writer "anguish," while in the earlier poem, "Interim," the dark region, it is suggested, is that of "submerged regret." In still another poem, "The Way It Is," it is "the heart's/peat-bog darkness" (FD 47). And in "Conversation in Moscow" in the same volume the darkness appears as "the source" (FD 91):

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the mineshaft of passion

despair somberly tolls its bell
from the depths of,

and wildest joy
sings out of too.

But there is more than buried emotion in this zone. There is, for example, material that might fall under the general rubric of "controlling design," as in "The Thread," where "Something is very gently,/invisibly, silently,/pulling at me—a thread/or net of threads" and of which the speaker asks "Was it/not long ago this thread/began to draw me? Or/way back? Was I/born with its knot about my/neck, a bridle?" (P 50). From the same volume, "The Tide" is another poem about the controlling organization of the inner life. Here the poet speaks of the "intelligence of/what pulls at our depths for/design" (P 16). The imagery of this poem even suggests a cause beyond the design itself: as the tide is under the sway of the moon, so are we under some such control, though what it is we do not know from this poem. In later works, such as "Knowing the Unknown," the pattern of controlling designs is generalized to the cultural level in the imagery of the airplane "thrust from the ancient/holding-patterns, down toward/runways newbuilt" (FD 6). This, too, seems to be what one finds when one tries to trace Levertov's poetry back to its origins: a darkness etched with controlling designs already inscribed.

And finally there is yet another kind of material within the darkness, as we can gather from the essay "Work and Inspiration: Inviting the Muse," where this area seems also to be the region of unconscious labor: "in the 'given' poem *the same kind of work* has gone on below, or . . . beyond, the threshold of consciousness" (PW 25).

energy
being in him a singing (P33)

The words that are formed from the darkness are characterized over and over by energy and light. "Beyond the End," the second poem in *Here and Now*, draws the distinction between nature and human beings that "in 'nature' there's no choice," while "we seem/almost to have it." And the nature of choice as presented in the poem is significant to Levertov's work, for it is "energy," and not simply energy to "go on living" but rather energy "to quicken, to activate: extend." Later in the poem it is described as "response, the will to respond" and still later the impulse "beyond whatever ends: to begin, to be, to defy" (CEP 29–30). In all, it seems to be the poet's very work, working beyond

the given, sometimes, perhaps, working against the given, if "given" is taken to mean reality as it is directly presented to us in all of its separateness.

Poetry, we gather, is a work of the active, not the passive, sensibility, not the sensibility that receives simply, but that responds, a point made clearer through the supplementary verbs "extend" and "defy," the second of which already sets the program for the later war poems. All this stands off against the state of nature established in the opening lines of the poem where "flowers/swing their heads in the wind, sun & moon/are as they are." In later works, this very distinction will be suggested between the will of the poet as implied here and other forms of will exercised "upon" the world (see, for example, "Bus" in *FD* 4) rather than in response to the world.

Energy, ENERGEIA. By the mid-fifties, as we see in the "Early and Uncollected Poems" (*CEP* 3-17), Levertov's poetic lines had begun to break out of the mold of the standard "boxed" stanzaic patterns and move across the page, disposed in space. The traditional idea of verse form is not only an idea of meter and rhyme and stanza, but also an idea of space, of how to utilize the space in which the poem appears, to see the space of the page as an organic part of the poem itself. Around the same time—the mid-fifties—Levertov had had a look at Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," where one reads that "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" (52). Levertov herself was writing about art: "on paper, on canvas, stroke, stroke; a counterpoint;/an energy opposing/the squandered energy" (*CEP* 12). Similarly, she writes of "Today's Saint" that "he's looking/not at the fragments but for/the interplay" (*CEP* 15-16), themes which dominate the first half of her first American book *Here and Now*. In "The Hands," for example, the poet cautions us against getting lost in the drift of the piano music and being swept away from the present. Instead, she exhorts us to look at "the crablike/hands, slithering/among the keys," an "almost painful/movement/that/restores the pull, incites/the head with the heart; a tension," a tension, furthermore, that energizes "as of actors at rehearsal, who move/this way, that way, on a bare stage, testing/their diagonals" (*CEP* 38).

The geometric allusion is appropriate to a poetry that has as one of its important concerns the vectors of energy that pass, as Olson put it, "from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (52), a bridge, we can note, across distance. Again

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and again in *Here and Now* we see reference to poetic energy as a function "to quicken, to activate; extend"; and "to go/just that much further, beyond the end/beyond whatever ends" (CEP 30); reference to ink drawings as "lines alive," as charged with "energy, gay, terrible, rare" and "passing/repassing, drooping/senselessly reviving" (CEP 39).

"DISPOSE YOUR ENERGIES," the poem "Zest" shouts (CEP 40), and much of this disposing is done in these early poems through the actions of the verbs. In "Xmas Trees on the Bank's Façade," for example, "the small lights/wink rapidly . . . among agitated green," and the wires are "looped" in the trees, babies are "pushed by," they "look up," and "stretch back" their arms. All of this energy is set off against squandered energy, "counter to un-lived life" (CEP 39), such as that led, one presumes, by the tellers in their "cages," less active even (their verb is "survey") than the commodity in which they deal, "money come, money go" (CEP 39).

As J. Hillis Miller says in his study of William Carlos Williams, "only if the poem shifts from the adjective which copies a dead nature to the verb which is alive with natural forces can the words be an extension of the processes of the earth" (310), an idea which would seem to flow from Fenollosa's essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" as transmitted to later poets by Ezra Pound.

Looking back at Levertov's early poems, however, one sees that this is not exactly the shift that takes place as she becomes more consciously reflective on the importance of energy in the poem. The early work, indeed, is marked by the interplay of set stanzas and verse forms against the power of enlivening strong verbs. However, what one sees in the later work is an extension of this early awareness, perhaps under the guidance of Olson's injunction that the poem be "at all points" a thing of energy. So one sees Levertov's attention going to even less conspicuous particles in the poem's body to construct the patterns of energy that she creates, "a dance of the words" (CEP 42). Those babies in "Xmas Trees on the Bank's Façade," for example, are not just pushed, but pushed "by"; they not only look, but look "up," and they not only stretch their arms, but stretch them "back." The adverbials take on a force that guides the reader's eye and mind at the same time that such mental movement creates an active network of verbal thrusts, the very essence of the energized artifact, which, like Kresch's paintings, "makes play with elements" (CEP 12). Similarly, in a later poem, "The Breathing" (P 80), the stasis of the set of images is offset not only by the movement enforced through enjambed lines of various strength, but also through such tiny elements as a sequence of adverbials—up, in,

uphill, over—and prepositional phrases, all of which direct the reader's attention in an energized way. Through such gestures Levertov participates in what was earlier called "the revolution of the word" in modern writing that draws the writer's attention to the very medium in which she works and lends to her poems "a radiance/consorting with the dance" (CEP 55) or, as the title of one poem has it, "A Stir in the Air" (CEP 80), a poem in which the movement of the lines creates the very idea that the poet is talking about:

the balance
is that fine—the dance
of hiving bees it is, that design
in air, joyfully
reducing possibilities to
one, the next act

The aesthetic of balance and act, of design and energy, implied here is an elegant one in itself, and goes far to describe the best of Levertov's work, which always has the effect of rescuing a logical next word from the precarious ambiguity of her syntactical gestures, the whole done up in a magnificent dance of tensions, the chief of them being the dance of words as they flirt with multiplicity, multivalence, to the point of chaos, and then at the last minute are reined back in the direction the poet wants.

This effect is almost exclusively the result of the skillful use of enjambment cutting diagonally across syntax to foreground a particular word for the purpose of letting its ambiguities come forward, setting up pools of energy in the poem whose vectors shoot off in every direction. This poetic method is one way that the author, in accordance with Olson's inducements, makes of the poem at every point a high-energy construct.

Comparing "Le Bateleur" (CEP 37) with the poem that follows it in *Here and Now*, "The Hands" (CEP 38), one sees the different possibilities for the effects of enjambment in relation to spacing of lines on the page and the different kinds of energy that result. In both poems, all the enjambments are what Charles Hartman calls "strong enjambment" (107), the breaking of the verse line across the syntactical line. In the first of these poems, all the lines begin at the left margin, and the effect of the enjambment is to keep the mind rolling swiftly from line to line to complete the syntax of the single sentence that comprises the poem. In the second poem, by contrast, the enjambments repeatedly run the eye/mind up against long white spaces, causing a kind of mental stutter as one reads, breaking the verbal flow of the poem and instituting in its

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place a rhythm of speech and silence alternating, reinforcing, interacting with one another. A few poems later, in "The Marriage (II)" this idea will become articulated thematic material: "speak or be silent; your silence/will speak to me" (CEP 48). The spacing and enjambments of "The Hands" enact a wholeness of experience, the poem catching the eye-mind-feeling complex in developmental motion. It is also a map of the very process of making the poem. (Elsewhere in this issue, David Shapiro has a very different sense of this poem.)

By 1960 in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, Levertov can almost routinely deliver poems that capitalize on the qualities we have been observing. "The Charge" (CEP 87), for example, creates an exemplary tension between the spatial and the temporal, the imagistic and the musical, in the enjoiner by music to the poet that she "make my image," which in fact she proceeds to do:

in its voices of metal and wood
in its dancing diagrams, moving
apart and together, along
and over and under a line
and speaking in one voice

The poem offers a number of remarkable features: the example of a poem searching for the inscape of music in general; the force of adverbials; the continuing development, suggested through the word "diagrams," of her sense of the poem as a field of energy deployed upon the page; and the hint of the idea of multiplicity unfolded in the poem and then resolved into a unity, one voice.

This controlled agitation as a characteristic of the poetic mind is a combination of the qualities prescribed in the Toltec document that opens *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads*, showing the artist as one who works with delight but also makes things with calm. Levertov presents her own image of this energy in "The Lagoon" (CEP 90):

where the imagination swims,
shining dark-scaled fish,
swims and waits, flashes, waits and
wavers, shining of its own light

We notice the arrhythmic, nonlinear activity of the imagination here, as well as the fact that it is associated with both darkness and light, and also that it is associated with an animal image. In still another poem, "The Dead Butterfly," we find the association with another animal of erratic movement. The lines of the second part of this poem, with their strong enjambments, keep the mind sliding ever onto a new meaning and re-reading of the words, coming to rest first in "tremulous

movement" and then later in "cut of the wings" (*CEP* 89), the latter being the mark of the dead butterfly.

The deploying of verbal energy onto the page figures, from Levertov's first American book forward, as one of the important principles of composition to bridge the distance between the separated minds of writer and reader. The poet's task is to find the patterns in which to lay the words so as to convey the wild energy that resides within the subject. And the energy itself often becomes one of these subjects.

In one sense this seems to be what living in her new-found city, New York, meant to Levertov. At times it becomes a means of valuation—that which is energized set over against that which is not. Money, for example, circulates and recirculates, accumulates and circulates, an example, in "Le Bateleur," of "civic prudence" (*CEP* 37), while in "Xmas Trees on the Bank's Façade" there is, beyond this closed system of exchange, "something wild and/ . . . joyful . . . Answerable to no one; least to us" (*CEP* 40). It is toward this wildness that the versification aspires, toward the capturing of or being activated by this energy. The invisible map for the poem is some patterned energy that the poet actualizes in "acts of language" (*CEP* 39), "dance of the words" (*CEP* 42).

This returns us to the idea in "Organic Form" that all things or events have an inner form, an inscape, which it is the poet's task to detect. The concept informs the theme of "Everything that Acts Is Actual," where "what you see of me" is played against "what the/imagination/seizes/as beauty" (*CEP* 44). In "The Lovers" (*CEP* 44–45), this very relationship becomes the source of trouble in the woman for whom what the man's imagination has seized as beauty becomes a kind of obligation to her, a standard to which she must aspire, a complex articulation of unity and separation.

In approaching this theme, we approach the heart of many of Levertov's poems. The relationship between some quasi-Platonic energy pattern or configuration which is grasped by the imagination becomes the connection that attaches us to particular forms of reality that we cherish or crave. This imaginative pattern can exist in varying degrees of quality or cheapness—the important point is that we get the reality we imagine; what holds us to the forms of reality that we cherish is an act of imagination. A change in one is accompanied by a change in the other, an idea that will become important later in those "public" poems like "May Our Right Hands Lose Their Cunning" which deal with the

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imaginative understanding of the Vietnam war, an event in which the imagination of the technocrats is focused entirely on the mechanical—"Now we can aim/straight into someone's kitchen" (FD 33)—and not the human, is patterned after some abstract, dehumanized way of seeing, not on imaginative or even sensory seeing.

The act of the imagination in Levertov's work is closely tied to sensory perceptions; thus we are frequently enjoined to look, to listen, to taste and see, and so on. The act of imagination moves toward not away from the sensory, enlivens the senses, and it is in this that "everything that acts is actual" because it partakes of the enlivening power of the imagination with its intense vision of human reality: "sparks, motes, flickers/of energy, willful, afraid, uttering/harsh interior cries" (CEP 96), or hands "opened in anguish or clenched in violence" (CEP 93) and for a moment, at least, distance is closed and darkness raised.

Writing, thus, brings not only energy but also light. *The Sorrow Dance* (1967) opens with a poem, "The Wings," connecting the two as polarities of energy, the black and the white, both of which are said to be vital to the ability of the poet to fly. The nature of the energies is in question in the poem. The "you" with whom the speaker is in dialogue has suggested that this black energy might be "inimical power," but the speaker suggests that it may be "pure energy" or "black only for being pent there" and that once released it might become "a white/source of light, a fountain/of light" (P 161-62).

Language is repeatedly associated in Levertov's poetry with light. In "Interim," for example, those words springing from darkness are "gold-bright" and "the only glitter/is the soft gleam of words" (CEP 4). In later poems, the poet herself is distinguished by the sign of light, often of fire. In "Song for Ishtar" the speaker—who is a pig, and a poet—is joined in interchange with the moon so that together they "rock and grunt, grunt and/shine" (CEP 75). In another poem, the poet, unlike other people, can perceive elves because she "has that cold fire in her" and "with that she may see them and by its light" (CEP 76) they know her and are not afraid. In "The Dog of Art," blind eyes look inward into a cavern and see perfectly that which the dog's voice then measures forth in music that is "sharp and bright,/bright flaming barks" (CEP 118). This transformation of darkness into light is underscored by the possibility of its reversal. In eulogizing the older generation of masters—Pound, Williams, HD—she remarks that they "have taken away the light of their presence." Just as words first emerged from or

were shaped out of darkness, so here in "September 1961" the older poets, in their old age, moving back into silence and "learning to live without words," are moving back into a condition described as "painful privacy" and "darkness" (P 81).

In "Candles in Babylon" (from the volume of the same title) the central figures are bringers of light whose efforts "to shield/the shivering flames" (CB ix) underscore the tenuousness of the mission. By suggestion, the darkness hovers around us for us to fall back into. In the late poems of public crisis this darkness seems to be the unconsciousness of bystanders and their insensitivity to the hazards threatening their world. In these poems it becomes clear that the transformation of darkness into words, into light, is a real project, the human project, never permanent, in need of continual renewal. We must *decide* to carry on with it; and even after we have decided, it remains a tenuous and fragile matter that we can do poorly. The poet's effort is to do it well. Animals may live speechless without inferiority, but the human being without the skill of saying lives coarsely. Crossing the threshold from darkness to words, we bring the darkness with us, dispel it only momentarily and in narrow circles. The light threatens always to go out.

A night that cuts between you and you
and you and you and you
and me

(CEP 33)

The transformative powers of light and energy, then, are temporary. In spite of them, a world founded on darkness engenders a world of distance, separation, and difference. In "A Ring of Changes," the cello "speaks from across the room." Of the couple listening to the cello the poet says, "We are in this room/together. You are alone" (CEP 108-09). The speaker in "Interim" is "not less alone/in city than in solitude" (CEP 4).

The subject is there already in the earliest poems. "Listening to Distant Guns," dated 1940, is a poem not about the war but about the distance between the war, "that low pulsation in the east," and the natural scene in the foreground that "betrays no whisper of the battle-scene" (CEP 3). In *Collected Earlier Poems*, the twenty poems gathered as "Early and Uncollected Poems" are dominated by a concern with human solitude, which "always beginning . . . /is a tide" (8) that washes over all of the poet's experience. The blind people encountered in the streets of Paris are a source of fear because "they cannot share my

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world" (8). Even the poet's own child, in its prenatal stage, is a similar kind of stranger, prompting the cry, "Who is this rider in the dark/ . . . nine months alone in a walled silence/our minds cannot fathom," and even after birth is destined for the same condition, "alone still, in a solitude/memory cannot reach" (11).

In the poems retained from *The Double Image* (1946), friends "are separate, sharing no secrets, each alone" (CEP 21) or set apart by "barricades . . . /too tall to scale, too dense to penetrate,/hiding the landscape of your distant life" (CEP 22). This solitude is the whole subject in "The Dreamers":

The sleeping sensual head
 lies nearer than her hand,
 but secret and remote,
 an impenetrable land.

Each, in the hardening crystal
 a prisoner of pride,
 abstractedly caresses
 the stranger at his side,

duality's abyss
 unspanned by desire,
 reason's cold salamander
 scatheless in the fire.

She hears the sound of midnight
 that breaks like a sea,
 and leans above the sleeper
 as secretive as he.

(CEP 22-23)

In "Love Poem" the poet says, "certainly there is a/mist between us/I can barely/see you" (CEP 35), and in "The Ache of Marriage" she says, "We Look for communion/and are turned away, beloved,/each and each" (P 77).

For Levertov this condition of separation, solitude, difference is the very occasion for poetry. From its inception this poetry is founded on the difference that opens within the self, between person and person, between the human and the natural, and even between the human and the divine, "our specks of life as fragile tesserae" (DH 107).

"Knowing the Unknown" reflects the extremity of our difference from the natural world. The master image of the poem is the landing of an aircraft, the human predicament that of being caught up in ancient codes of behavior that may not function in a new world. But the larger

and more poignant question is not so much whether we can get along with each other but whether we even belong on earth—"does it want us?" "Shall we be welcome?" (FD 6). The overriding irony lies in the reversal of expectations raised by the title of the poem. It is not nature that is unknown and we who are the explorers. In fact, *we* are the outsiders, and nature may even be too busy—"dense, preoccupied,/skeptical"—to bother making our acquaintance.

And as we are the unknown to nature, so is the divine to us "Unknown, unknowable," a condition deriving, as in "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus," in part from a wavering faith—"I believe and/interrupt my belief with/doubt. I doubt and/interrupt my doubt with belief" (CB 110)—and in part, as in "Come into Animal Presence" from simple neglect: "holiness does not dissolve, it is a presence/of bronze, only the sight that saw it/faltered and turned from it" (P 23).

Thus the originating moment of Levertov's poetry is not a bit of aestheticism but a vision of *division* in the human condition; "thigh and tongue . . . /are heavy with it,/it throbs in the teeth" (P 77).

What wings . . .

....

mind and heart must grow

to touch, trembling,

....

not in alternation but both at once,

....

that which is and

that which is (FD 99)

A certain stubbornness fuels a continued pursuit of the undifferentiated, despite all the empirical evidence mounted against its existence, until "something sundered begins to knit" (P 137). Persistent, if fragile, dreams of unity are themselves, perhaps, enough of a lure, a hint of "space as dreams dissolve it" (CEP 41). Lawrence Lipking has said of Keats that his poems register a recurrent formative experience of waking to find that dream and reality had become one (9). But in Levertov the case is quite the opposite. Although dreams provide an intimation of unity, day always returns "the brilliant shower of coloured dreams to dust" (CEP 10). In fact, "any attempted dream must fall/to ruin in this light" (CEP 3), and in doing so wake us to our lives as "intemperate, open, illusory" (CEP 95). The image for this condition of dreamed unity and real division, as we've noted earlier, is often an image of love and sexuality, as in "Bedtime" (P 167):

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We are a meadow where the bees hum,
mind and body are almost one

as the fire snaps in the stove
and our eyes close,

and mouth to mouth, the covers
pulled over our shoulders,

we drowse as horses drowse afield,
in accord; though the fall cold

surrounds our warm bed, and though
by day we are singular and often lonely.

Nevertheless, there remains a hope—sometimes it sounds like confidence—that “The authentic! Shadows of it/sweep past in dreams” (P 59), that there are “supererogatory divinations one is/lured on by” (P 177) and, from as early as 1946, a sense that the poet “can assume/an attitude more listening than longing,/extend invisible antennae towards/some intimation, echo, emanation” (CEP 4) to pick up “the known/ appearing fully itself, and/more itself than one knew” (P 59). What is “fully itself” about the known is that like swimmers in water “heavy we are, our flesh/of stone and velvet goes down,/goes down” (P 164), and what is “more itself” is that there is a “world indivisible, from which we fly” (CEP 95).

The hope remains that beyond division and difference are connection and design, a sense that “life’s indivisible” (BW 27), confidence in which is made simultaneously possible and difficult—difficult largely because of our immersion, “our eyes,/our lives, too close to the canvas . . . /to see it” (OP 80). At times the overriding of difference becomes a matter of perspective and is often cast in images of flight: “always air/looked down through, gives/a reclamation of order, re-/visioning solace” (FD 3). This holds, at least, for the perceived order of things.

There is another sense of indivisibility that we might call the holistic, the sense that “perhaps/these imperfections . . . /are part of perfection” (OP 80), even, during the Vietnam War years, the sense that “Joy/is real, torture/is real,” but this is more difficult to maintain: “we strain to hold/a bridge between them open,/and fail,/or all but fail” (FD 99). This perception is based on the imagination that attends to “oddments,/for daily use” (FD 102) and attends to them so fully that it can finally arrive at the “song in all/humankind, that rooms, houses, parks, streets, fields/and particular corners of fields, rivers and

certain/eye-span reaches of rivers, are notes in, as people are" (*FD* 102-03). Local details, in this vision, are "a note or chord of notes/ . . . in the stream of song" or color and form "in a vast unfolding design" (*DH* 103).

There is also the claim of sheer immanence, that which is sometimes taken to be the whole of Levertov's vision: "I like to find/what's not found/at once, but lies/within something of another nature" (*CEP* 90). This is the sense of the presence of spirit in the world: "God's in the dust/not sifted/out from confusion" (*OP* 80) or "wind from the compass points, sun at meridian,/these are the forms the spirit enters" (*OP* 87).

There is also what we might call the secular mode, based on one's experience of love, friendship, kinship: "What more/can love be than epiphany!" (*FD* 98). At a particular phase of Levertov's career this is the mode of political action in which "solitaries drew close, releasing/each solitude into its blossoming" (*CB* 84), similar to Lucien Goldmann's idea that effective action in the world always depends on hurling the single subject into a condition of "transsubjectivity." As Levertov puts it, "great energy flowed from solitude,/and great power from communion" (*CB* 85). The unity of this mode hinges on human will and historical occasion, and thus may be brief and sporadic, a fact Levertov has noted as early as *The Double Image* (1946), where in love "we sense a dream's reality,/and know, before the match goes out,/ephemeral eternity" (*CEP* 26).

Finally there is yet another mode of apprehension, which begins early in Levertov's work and "is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories" (*PW* 7).

This is the concept by which Levertov has referred to herself and Robert Duncan as "rebels of Platonism." In his own poems Duncan maintains an awareness of the background of existence "wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall" (7) and to the relationship between background and foreground:

How all Forms in Time will grow
And return to their single Source
Informed by Grief, Joy, insatiable Desire
And cold Remorse (23)

The source and control of worldly things is in some other place: "Love sets its triumphs in the void,/commands the real" (35). His understanding of reality places the foundations of all things outside of the actual,

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though perhaps the patterns from outside may also be found inside actuality.

Levertov, increasingly clearly in her later volumes, shares with Duncan an attention to what he called the "potencies in common things" (14). From this perspective what might have looked like merely cultural inheritance in a poem like "Knowing the Unknown"—

Our trouble
is only the trouble anyone,
all of us, thrust from the ancient
holding-patterns, down toward
runways newbuilt,
knows

(FD 6)

—can now be read as something quite different, not designs built in by socio-cultural programming but traces from some Platonic world of Ideal forms:

if there is bliss,
it has
been already
and will be

(FD 112)

These ideal origins may be summoned, at times, by memory—"I can remember/ . . . the blessed light that caressed the world/before I stumbled into/this place of mere/not-darkness" (OP 83)—or learned from nature—"Rivers remember/in the pulse of their springs,/in curl and slide and onrush/lakeward and seaward,/a touch/shuddering them forth" (OP 71)—or gained in vision and dream—"that it was not a fragile, only, other world,/there were, there are (I learned) a host,/each unique, yet each having/the grace of recapitulating/a single radiance, multiform" (CB 116).

The Platonic schema invests the poet with vocation, as she notes in closing "The Many Mansions," the final poem in *Candles in Babylon* of 1982:

This is what, remembering,
I must try, telling myself again,
to tell you. For that the vision
was given me: to know and share.

(116)

This sense has persisted for more than thirty years. In "A Testament," written in 1959 and first published in 1960 in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, Levertov asserted that "it is given to the

seer to see, but it is then his responsibility to communicate what he sees, that they who cannot see may see, since we are 'members one of another'" (*PW* 3). And even earlier, in *Here and Now* (1957), she had said that whoever speaks must "pick out/the core/lost impulse/give it back" (*CEP* 52).

In spite of the persistence of the Platonic nature of Levertov's vision over the years, it is interesting that as late as the last lines of the last poem in the 1989 volume *A Door in the Hive*, our connection with our ancient origins is still spoken of with a degree of uncertainty, a condition of "as if":

But something in us, while the millennia
monotonously pass

and pass

hungers to offer up
our specks of life as fragile tesserae
towards the vast mosaic—temple, eidolon;

to be, ourselves, imbedded in its fabric,
as, once, it was from that we were broken off
(107)

It is also worth noting that this Platonic model leaves us again in a condition of separation and difference. Unlike Duncan, Levertov has not yet shown us the full cycle of departure, immersion, and return. For her we labor under the only fate that this ultimate separation can offer, that of hope: "With chips and shards, rubble of being,/we construct/not You but our hope of You" (*DH* 107).

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From "For the Record"¹

JAMES LAUGHLIN

I have known Denise for many years, and she is an inspiring, loving and lovable person. My admiration for her continually increases. One of the things I like most in her is her social commitment. I haven't counted the times she has gone to jail for her beliefs. Most publicized perhaps was the time when she lay down on the sidewalk in front of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in Washington until she was carted off in the paddy wagon. I don't know that she has actually scaled the fence of that nuclear power plant in New Hampshire, but I'm sure she gave it a good try. This passion and courage come through in her work. Some people object to what her politics do to her "social" poems. Her second English publisher, Tom Maschler at Cape, refused her book containing the Berkeley riot poems. He found it too political. I thought this was odd for a man who was making two trips a year to Havana.

As a technician, Denise has the gift that [William Carlos] Williams had for knowing where to break the line. Free verse is a mess—it's like chopped up prose—if the lines are not well broken, by the eye as well as by the ear. Williams had a fantastic ear (and eye) for breaking his lines. Denise has written me about her metric:

To me, the visual appearance is always secondary to its sonic (or auditory) aspect. Thus the lines are broken to indicate, as in a musical score, pitch & emphasis. How the lines look, insofar as they are neat or messy, wild or disciplined in visual pattern, may reinforce the sonic element.

So far as I know, Denise has never made use of Williams's "variable foot," which Hugh Kenner, with affection I think, recently called a "rubber ruler," but she has given me a very cogent analysis of it:

Williams' variable foot I believe to be not very different from Hopkins' "sprung rhythm." It has to do with the establishment of

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a norm of duration in time, per line, which accords to a line of a few syllables, as much time as one with many. This in effect slows down the sparse lines (which if they have monosyllabic words will in any case move more slowly than the swiftly rippling polysyllables) & enforces extra respect for whatever silences are present anyway. Thus the duration of longer and shorter lines is not contrasted but equal.

Another, easier way to talk of it is to notice that, long before Williams theorized the variable foot, he wrote in lines that had a freely varied number of feet or syllables but a definite dominance of some strong stress.

Denise's background is very interesting. She had told me about her family:

My father came from a learned family in Russia & studied the Talmud and would no doubt have been a Rabbi if he had not read the New Testament while a student at the University of Koenigsberg in Prussia, where he was sent to get a regular as well as a Yeshiva education. (Jews could not attend Russian universities in Tsarist days.)

My parents met in Constantinople, where my mother, who is Welsh, had gone to teach in the Scottish high school for girls. They then lived in Warsaw & Leipzig, coming to England after World War I. It was there that my father was ordained as an Anglican priest.

Denise didn't go to school in England but was educated by her parents and took ballet classes. Her first poetry was more or less in the school that was called neo-Romanticism; one of its leaders was Henry Treece, a follower of Dylan Thomas who didn't have Thomas's zip. Her first book, *The Double Image*, was praised by Herbert Read. During the war she became a nurse and later married an American G.I., Mitch Goodman, who wrote a first-rate war novel. While they were living in Paris, something crucial happened: she discovered Williams. It was love at first read. When she came to America she forgot about the neo-Romantics. Williams became her inspiration—and soon her friend. She found her own new, American voice.

In accounts of the Black Mountain poets we often find the name Levertov prominent in the list. She never studied at Black Mountain, but [Robert] Creeley published her poetry in the *Black Mountain Review*. In 1960, in his influential anthology *The New American Poetry*, Donald Allen grouped her with the Black Mountain poets and she has "stuck" there ever since—but not to her displeasure, since Creeley and Robert Duncan became two of her best poet-friends. I hope that someday their correspondence may be published; it would be a unique record of the

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poesis of the period. She knew [Charles] Olson only slightly and they did not correspond but she learned from his

emphasis on the necessary energy of the line & the assumption (named by C.O. "composition by field") that whatever events & images impinged upon the overt or initial subject during the course of composition, i.e. while the imagination was focused on that poem, had a valid part in it (was not to be regarded as irrelevant). Of course, taken to an extreme this can produce flabby absurdities—but it can also act as a corrective to an overselectivity that only results in exquisite but lifeless bijoux.

Her students at various colleges have told me that Denise Levertov is one of the best teachers, if not the best, that they have worked with. I can believe this from reading the prose books which New Directions has published—*The Poet in the World* and *Light Up the Cave*. When my own students ask me about "organic form" I always urge them to read her "Notes on Organic Form." It is the clearest statement I know on the poetic structure which now informs so much of the best contemporary poetry. She has also written some very original stories and done beautiful translations of the French poets [Eugène] Guillevic and [Jean] Joubert, and (with Edward C. Dimock, Jr.) of classic Bengali Krishna songs.

NOTE

¹ This article is excerpted from James Laughlin, "For the Record: On New Directions and Others," *American Poetry* 1:3 (Spring 1984), and reprinted by permission of Mr. Laughlin and the editors.

Levertov and the Bengali Love Songs¹

EDWARD C. DIMOCK, JR.

The idea of collaborating with Denise Levertov in translating Bengali love songs was raised by Bonnie R. Crown, who was then Publications Director for the Asia Society in New York. About 1960 or 1961 I had been taken with the quality of the songs while I was reading more generally in the literature for purposes of dissertation research. Bonnie was a friend of mine, and at some point I showed her a few rough translations. She too was taken with them. Her judgment, quite correct, was that if the touch of an English poet were added, they would make a charming and instructive book.

I did not know Denise at the time, except through a little of her work, but Bonnie was a mutual friend. I must say that at first the idea did not strike me well. I had read *The Jacob's Ladder* and a few other things that Denise had written, and her work struck me as a little hard-edged for the kind of sweetly romantic idyll that the Bengali songs represented. I could not have been more wrong.

Bonnie got Denise to try her hand at a couple of the poems. They were so successful that there was no longer any question. Bonnie's sense about it was right on the button. It turned out, in fact, that much earlier Denise had written a couple of poems on the Krishna theme, inspired by an exhibition of miniatures she had seen, and that these were amazingly like the Bengali songs that Bonnie felt should be properly translated: with a wistful love, a certain gentle irony, a playfulness, a dignity befitting both a young girl in love and hymns of devotion to a deity.

There was little further discussion, if any, and there were no formalities. I was in India for a year—1963–1964, I believe it was—and I just started sending Denise (sometimes through Bonnie and later, directly) rough translations, some nearly literal, others less so, with

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explanatory notes where the language or the religious tradition seemed to require them. Denise would work on them, sometimes leaving a poem almost literal, sometimes, with her extreme sensitivity, changing a word or phrase aptly, and sometimes redoing a whole poem. We would continue to correspond in this way until we were both satisfied. Some of the correspondence reproduced here shows the sort of thing that went on. I might mention that, as with one of the "Aksepanuraga" poems, we rejected a substantial number of poems—some as requiring too much explanatory paraphernalia, and a few simply because they did not come across well as poems (they are, after all, songs, and sometimes the music carries the punch).

We did almost all the work by correspondence. The correspondence itself was very smooth, though it was somewhat irregular. I would send Denise a batch of material when it was ready, and she would send it back when it was ready. I was in India, as I have said, finishing a book and starting work on another; neither one of them was specifically on these lyrics, though the lyrics constituted a part of a more general literature that was the point of my study. So I was reading a lot of them (there are great numbers of collections in Bengali; the Bengalis too think many of them are beautiful), and when I would come across one I particularly liked I would send a rough translation off to Denise.

The better part of the book was finished during that period 1963–1964. We met a few times, in Chicago or New York, after I got back from India, but mostly to socialize; the great bulk of the work had been done and sent to our editor, Eugene Oyang, at Doubleday. As far as the publisher was concerned, that too we left to Bonnie Crown. I don't know whether she had had Doubleday Anchor (the original publisher) in mind from the beginning or not. I wonder a little that she didn't go first to New Directions. Or maybe she did. I just don't know. She did know Laughlin. I think he was even on her Advisory Committee at the Asia Society, though I couldn't swear to it.

We then had a reading, at the Academy of American Poets, at the Guggenheim. A Bengali singer first presented the songs as songs. I made a few introductory remarks, and then Denise read, beautifully.

About the reading I have to confess that I don't remember much. It was a full house, I know, and the reception was very warm indeed for Denise. Notables in the audience I don't recall. There was a small reception at Bonnie and Jim Crown's apartment, but it was for half a dozen close friends. Denise also went off with friends and that was the last time I saw her, to my regret. (In fact, that is not entirely true; I went

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See note below

VP M 72

(30)

Milan

My love, what more shall I say to you?

In life and in death, in birth after birth
you are the lord of my life.

A noose of love binds

my heart to your feet.

My mind fixed on you alone, I have offered ^{you} everything;
in truth, I have become your slave.

In this family, in that house, who is really mine?

Whom can I call my own?

It was bitter cold, and I took refuge
at your lotus feet.While my eyes blink, and I do not see you,
I feel the heart within me die.

A touch-stone

I have threaded, and wear upon my throat,
says Candidasa.

Not as striking a poem as some we have, I think, but it is good of a type; besides, it is the only one of all the padas I have read that translates itself: the line divisions are just as they are in the Bengali, and the rendering is very close to being literal. Line 4: the word actually is "noose", as in hangman, adding perhaps a bit of irony; though maybe you would prefer not to keep it. The blinking eyes bit is a trifle extravagant, of course, but is a very old and very common poetic conceit. On the whole, I rather like the poem; there is a powerful religious quality in the Bengali, which I'm not sure I've caught just right, unlike many of Candidasa's poems, which are sometimes pretty earthy.

This seems very well as it is, except for the first line, which is banal, which seems somehow a little less so if its rhythm is changed by substituting Beloved for My love. Also not the insertion of 'you' in line 6.

lenise.

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VP M 748

Aksepamuraga

A wicked woman — fouler than the foulest poison.

So his mother's cruelty, like/a burning fire in me.

My tyrant husband, a whetted razor's edge;

and on every side, reproachful dutiful women.

My love, what can I say to you?

Whatever they may say, you are ^{the} my life.

Your mark is on my body, and they know.

For shame I cannot raise my face before chaste women,

I cannot bear the cruelty, of the thrust,

seeing other women making signs to me.

I have weighed it all, and I have chosen

abuse, for you.

~~Balarama-dasa says~~ So Balarama-dasa says.

There are parts of this I am not entirely sure of, though of the several I have tried, this one seems to hang together best. I think the first line is a quote, indicating what the mother-in-law says; but there is no way to tell in the Bengali; I suggest we be non-committal, if possible. Line 7: the term I have translated "mark" literally means "stain", but I hesitated over "your stain is on my body". The line is a difficult one, and I might read too much into it, but I think there is a pun:

tomar	kalanka	bandhu	gaya	saba	loke
your	stain	O lover	on body	all	people
			sing		

So, rather more subtly (sp?) than would be usual, an alternative would be, "The people sing (rejoice at) your stain (on me)". If it is possible to work in both of these, so much the better; if not, the first interpretation is I think the obvious one. Line 9: "The thrust" is literally "cruel blade". The last two lines before the signature are weak, and maybe you will be able to find a better solution: literally, "I have examined all (or 'everyone' — perhaps the criticism of such people as these is not worth listening to), and I have taken (chosen) your abuse". "Your abuse" is ambiguous, but I think the interpretation above is the right one. "Abuse", however, I am not at all happy with.

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Aksepanuraga

VP
VP M 748A wicked woman - fouler than the foulest poison.So his mother's cruelty, like fire
burning in me.My tyrant husband: the whetted
edge of a razor. And all around me,
reproachful dutiful women.

My love, what shall I tell you?

Whatever their calumnies, you
are my life itself.

My body

bears your brand - they know it.

For shame I cannot ~~look~~ look up

(alternate: raise my head)

before chaste women,

I cannot bear the cruelty, the knife-thrust
of seeing my fellow women make signs to me.

I have weighed it all.

Yet I have chosen

to endure abuse for your sake.

So Belarama-dasa says.

I think putting line 1 in italics emphasizes the choice of possible meanings, which seems better than just leaving it hang. i.e., it seems to me it could be that she is quoting a proverb, a saying, in reference to her mother-in-law, couldn't it? or rather, that if this is what her mother-in-law says of her, she recalls it, repeating it under her breath as it were, and applies it back to the m-in-l., who is cruel to her. I have left 'I have weighed it all', but with a period so that what it refers to is 'all - is' - all the sufferings mentioned above. I don't see what's wrong with 'abuse' in the context.

Tenise.

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Aksepamiraga (?)I would like to forget
about this one.
D. Oct 7th

I have thought about the sweetness of your words,
 I know your goodness, and come quietly to you.
 I cannot tell you how this came about;
 he put out the lamp and fell asleep.
 My friend, I have borne his vanity
 and my heart has not been broken.
 I touched him with my hands,
 hoping to arouse his love,
 but he would not wake
 from his habitual sleep.
 He covered his face with his hands,
 and stirred,
 and slept.
 I did not dare awaken him again.

I'm not entirely sure whether the poem belongs in this section or in Mane but that's not too important at the moment. Several of the lines are difficult (I think the MS in which the poem was found is pretty corrupt). The second line can say either "I come quietly" or "I come to this lonely place"; the 2nd alternative is possible if Radha is speaking not to one of her companions about Krsna, but to Krsna about her husband, and this is completely unclear. "My heart has not been broken" is completely inadequate; there is one word in the line that baffles me, but a literal translation would almost certainly be something like "my heart has not split like a thunderclap" — do what you will with that. There is one other possible interpretation of the line, and as I write this it seems more and more reasonable to me: in dialectal Bengali the negative particle is sometimes not used as a negative at all, but as a reinforcement of a positive; thus, a possibility is "my heart has split like a thunderclap". "Habitual sleep" is also not so good; the Bengali means, "sleep which is his nature". The last line is pretty obscure, but I feel reasonably confident of it.

Am stymied on
this by the confusion I
feel about the person addressed
in the 1st 2 lines, also 'vanity' in
line 5, — 2. Can't seem to make
any sense of it.
Emit

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to several of her readings in Chicago and elsewhere, but stayed in the background).

I should add that I have lost touch with Anju Chaudhuri, whose illustrations I think add greatly to the charm of the poems' presentation. Anju was a young Calcutta artist who had come to Bonnie Crown's attention when Bonnie was making a trip through the place. It was her taste that brought Anju in, and good taste it was.

The little book, which has been reprinted by the University of Chicago Press, has met with what I think is rather extraordinary success for a work of its kind. That is due, certainly, to the warmth and simplicity of the songs themselves, but even more to Denise's versatility and delicacy of touch.

NOTE

¹ Edward C. Dimock, Jr. has kindly permitted me to fashion this essay from the substance of letters we exchanged in August and September 1992. The poems — *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali*, translated by Dimock and Levertov, and originally published by Doubleday Anchor in 1967—were reprinted by the University of Chicago Press in 1981. The translations are reprinted from typescripts with the permission of Mr. Dimock, Ms. Levertov, and the University of Chicago Press. — R.R.J.

Guillevic/Levertov: The Poetics of Matter

LEONARD SCHWARTZ

Denise Levertov's introduction to and translations of the French poet Eugène Guillevic in her volume *Guillevic: Selected Poems* are revealing of her own poetics, most particularly in terms of her relation to nature. Indeed, a poet's take on another poet usually reveals as much about the former as it does about the latter, and often is motivated by what the former wishes to take away from those materials, or reinforce in herself. Guillevic's interest is in nature, and to a great degree so is Levertov's, although for her nature is often placed into the context of other researches.

The term "nature," however, begs the questions relevant to what is being invented in these poetries, and why it might be that Levertov found Guillevic's poetry engaging enough to spend her time translating it. First of all, "nature" here seems to mean objects, both manufactured ones that still bear the traces of their original mineral identity, and unworked ones that comprise part of the world of non-human force; in short, objects are things that present themselves as heavy, dense, opaque, and real, over and apart from human identity and use. But nature also means *immediacy*, a reference not only to presence but also to a present tense that, it is held, we can actually grasp by relating to a past: which means, in this case, by relating it to the eternal, to the fact that it always was, and will be, as if presence itself were a proof of the eternal. But above all, what is of interest in these two poetries is the invocation of nature in terms of a notion of the unconscious, as if there were a way in which the raw materials of the physical world were not merely alien activities but parts of ourselves still beyond our reach. Rather than locating the unconscious in some mythical elsewhere, or in

a psychic compartment that, if one is lucky, one might come into contact with only through speech, these poets locate the unconscious, to slightly alter the context of a Husserlian formula (but only slightly), *in the things themselves*. A provocative thought—that the unconscious lies in the raw materials and physical objects that surround us. I suspect that sculptors and painters are more aware of this possibility than are others. Guillevic is that rare serious poet who thinks he sees a limit to language, a point at which poetry gives way to the contemplation of things as they are—a point Levertov herself simultaneously posits and desires to go beyond.

Born in 1907, Eugène Guillevic is generally thought of as one of the major French lyric poets of his generation, along with, perhaps, Jean Follain. His principal collections of poetry include *Terraqué* (1942), *Exécutoire* (1947), *Gagner* (1949), *Carnac* (1961), *Sphère* (1963), *Avec* (1966), and *Euclidiennes* (1967), from which Levertov's selections are drawn; *Ville* (1969), *Paroi* (1970), *Inclus* (1973), and *Du Domaine* (1977) all appear later. Guillevic is not, in any traditional way, an especially difficult poet, as is for example his contemporary René Char (they were born in the same year); nor for that matter is he as good a poet as Char, at least in terms of interrogating language. During the occupation Guillevic joined the Communist Party, and a fair portion of his poetry is of a directly political nature. Chiefly, however, he has been regarded as a poet of nature, and often as a poet who can illuminate nature's darker tones. What seems to impress Levertov—and what no doubt leads her into the translation of Guillevic, with the implicit support and insight such translation could lend to her own writing—is the promise of vision. In "*Voir*" ("To See," GSP 6) Guillevic writes:

*Il s'agit de voir
Tellement plus clair,
De faire avec les choses
Comme la lumière.*

Levertov renders this quite literally:

*It's a question of seeing
so much clearer,
of doing to things
what light does to them. (GSP 7)*

Compare this to section S of "Relearning the Alphabet" (RA 118), the poem which I take to be the finest of Levertov's career:

*I turn in the forest.
About me the tree-multitudes
twist their roots in earth*

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to rip it, draw
hidden rivers up into
branch-towers.
Their crowns in the light sway
green beyond vision.

In both passages the human ability to adequately perceive with sufficient wealth is cast into doubt—in Levertov's poem there are certain greens beyond perception—and the implication is that only by becoming like light, becoming like certain properties of the physical world, might these things become visible. Both passages urge us to see better, to look again.

But what is there, first and foremost, to see? Principally here, there are objects, natural and manufactured things, not so much the flora and fauna of the earth as the supposedly inanimate objects which remain stubborn and impenetrable, even befuddling, unfathomable, or frightening. It is this edge of Guillevic's poetry, certainly its most allusive and lasting, which clearly impresses Levertov. In her introduction to the volume she writes: "And so the simplicity of diction, the plain and hard naming of things without descriptive qualification, reverberates, in the highly charged condensation of Guillevic's poems, with the ambiguity, the unfathomable mystery of natural objects. To enter his work is to enter a kind of verbal Carnac, a gathering of sacred stones" (viii). Or again: "Like Francis Ponge . . . Guillevic has many poems devoted to things. . . . Guillevic regards the primordial object with a kind of terror; it seems sometimes that he names it . . . to exorcise it—rather than either to reveal it or to extend his own life by identifying with it" (x). She cites "A Nail" (45) as an example of the kind of poem whose simplicity of diction allows it to name things without descriptive qualification:

The nail
is only the least bit rusted.

It has not had to serve yet.
It has been resting,
the way one rests.

It's one of the things that make
this silence gone
in search of itself.

One might wish for more on the page than is provided here, more text by which to set thought and feeling into motion. But of course Guillevic purposely limits his set of linguistic tools in the hope of

drawing a little closer to the physical thing, the tool from which a bit of the world itself will one day be made, a sliver of pure possibility in a steely and already actualized form. Again, Levertov's translation attempts to honor the directness and uncloudedness of diction, and one cannot help thinking of her reference to William Carlos Williams in the introduction: "No doubt, loving Williams as I do, and important for me as he has been, it was some sense of this likeness that first drew me to Guillevic" (xii). Perhaps, again, in this particular case, the translation is unnecessarily flat in this or that place. For example, Guillevic's second stanza reads: "*Il n'a pas dû servir encore./Il reposait/Comme on repose*" (44), in which the repetition of *repose* in altered conjugation functions nicely, with the vowel sound sliding down appealingly from "a" to "o." This musical quality is not established by "resting" to "rests," which strikes me here as dulling, a repetition that adds nothing. This, of course, is giggling. But it is also to say that with texts as compact as these, translation is a tricky business, and every syllable counts. In general Levertov is more successful.

Objects, then, are a foothold in the real. But the comment of Levertov's to which we must return if we truly want to appreciate the appeal of Guillevic's compositions is the one concerning the "gathering of sacred stones" of Carnac. Carnac, in the province of Breton, is the place of Guillevic's birth, although soon afterward the family moved away to the Belgian frontier. Nevertheless, it is this childhood landscape that remains haunting, "sacred," before Guillevic's returned and roving adult eye. Indeed, the introduction to *Selected Poems* begins with Levertov's drawing attention to the birthplace and is worth quoting at length:

The great ritual places of the Celts, whether in Wales or Cornwall, Ireland or Brittany, the places where the great and small stones or *menhirs* are gathered in powerful and enigmatic testimony to forgotten certainties, are landscapes of a profound austerity. In such landscapes the senses are undistracted from the elemental: rock, sky, sea are there not backgrounds but presences. Beginning in such a place, Guillevic learned to recognize all else in life likewise as presence, not as incidental properties. Man, bird, cloud, lake, night, death, the sunlight—he knows them as Powers and Principalities, meets them face to face, and disdains the folly of attempting to use them as mere autobiographical adornments. (vii)

It is this link between presence and past, albeit a past of such evident durability that it also promises an unbroken future, that I find especially compelling here, since it distinguishes itself from those

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philosophies of presence in which one is urged to spontaneously grasp the moment all by itself, in a kind of analytic isolation. Rather, what is sacred about these stones in Guillevic's poetry, according to Levertov, is that they seem to annul time *by means of* their absolute durability—and when we are liberated from that rush of events known as time we are placed into a situation in which things can be encountered without interference. It hardly matters whether this annulment of time by way of sacred stones is an illusion: clearly it is the imaginative experience of detaching from the contingent that Levertov wishes to uncover through a drawing nearer to what Guillevic has written. In section 5 of "The Rocks" Guillevic writes of the stones themselves:

The dance is within them,
the flame is within them,
when it seems good to them.

Not as a spectacle before them,
but in them.

The dance of their intimate
and lucid madness.
The flame in them
of the live coal's core. (79)

Compare this to two passages from Levertov's "Relearning the Alphabet," first from section A: "Sweep up anguish as with a wing-tip, brushing the ashes back to the fire's core" (110); and then from C: "Clear, cool? Not those evasions. The seeing/that burns through, comes through to/the fire's core" (111).

The vision of a "core of flame" is clearly what the two poets have in common. This vision of something at once solid and limber, permanent and changing, cold and yet aflame, can then be imposed upon nature itself, producing a present that not only can be grasped but cannot be avoided, being itself the basis of everything, ineluctably sacred. In this way it is both the core of the earth and its essence. From section T of "Relearning the Alphabet":

The forest is holy.
The sacred paths are stone.
A clearing.
The altars are shifting deposits of pineneedles,
hidden waters
streets of choirwood,

not what the will
thinks to construct for its testimonies. (119)

As with Guillevic's rocks, inside of which life in all its madness dances and the spectacle of nature is on view, so too pineneedles, water, and wood shift about in ever new forms, constituting and reconstituting Levertov's sacred paths and clearing. The link between a comprehension of the sacredness of the natural world and an altered relation to time is, however, best expressed in Levertov's fine translation of Guillevic's untitled "eternity" poem:

Eternity
never was lost.

What we did not know

was how to translate it into days,
skies, landscapes,

into words for others,
authentic gestures.

But holding on to it for ourselves,
that was not difficult,

and there were moments
when it seemed clear to us
we ourselves were eternity. (53)

One clearly sees in a poem like this the manner in which it is intended that nature should infuse a representational art with a desire to express the eternal. Here too the desire for eternity is translated from sky and landscape into more human terms, words at first, and then, in the last stanza, self-awareness. It is interesting to note that for Guillevic the self-awareness of this absolute order is an easier thing than the expression of it in words, as if clarity could be achieved only at a pre-linguistic level.

Most original in the work of these two poets, however, is that imagistic invocation of this natural world as the site of the unconscious, without ever committing itself to any ideology of the unconscious, be it Freudian, Jungian, or other. This materialization of the unconscious is on the one hand liberating: it means that we need only advance to approach all that we have not yet realized about ourselves, that we must only touch things to convert them to conscious life. It is also, potentially, frightening—there may be very literal seismic shocks in store for us, and a greater vulnerability when we do find ourselves gazing out upon the necessary. Indeed, when Levertov writes, "Guillevic regards the primordial object with a kind of terror; it seems sometimes that he names it . . . to exorcise it—rather than either to reveal it or to extend

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his own life by identifying with it" (x), and when she points out that he returns over and over again to the childhood mystery of Carnac, it becomes almost plausible to accept this vision in terms of the terror of the repressed, or, to be less doctrinaire, as the opacity of a content that weighs us down, outside of us but part of ourselves nonetheless.

In both Guillevic's poetry and Levertov's writing, the image of the cave serves as a powerful image of this relation of unconscious matter and conscious "I," and also of a containment in the natural world that inescapably comes to resemble oneself. "Cave," of course, is of a piece with "stone," and is therefore a kind of dwelling in the sacred, however profoundly and uncomfortably beneath the surface that dwelling may be found. Here is Guillevic's "In the Cave of Ice":

In the cave of ice
where light was fearful

we have been dwelling
these months,
under the icicles.

But this is only
an image; need for an image

for where we crouched, hiding,
was an amorphous place

far down below language. (7)

Here Guillevic introduces the figure of the ice cave only to drop it in favor of its residue two stanzas later, so that what we have is both a cave and not a cave. The "need" which brings the cave into the composition in the first place is for an image that renders a sense of standing underneath things, closer to the core of the earth that supports everything else. Of course a cave in which "light is fearful" not only conjures up images of blind fish and bats learning to live without light, but also of those men chained in the dark of Plato's cavern, as well as Levertov's own appropriation of Anne Sexton's line, "Light Up the Cave." Yet both Guillevic and Levertov are outside of the Platonic tradition, to the extent that they see no option but the cave, each in his or her own way wishing to make it inhabitable or at least sufferable. Though the poem distances itself from its central image of "cave," it retains that name for its title, as it best represents a lengthy crouching and hiding in unconscious, unaware parts. Even after recourse to this image, the poet feels that the actual experience remains unfathomable, an "amorphous" place about which nothing more can be said. (The

French here literally reads "*dans un lieu sans figure*," which might literally be rendered "in a place without shape" or in some other manner that might better illustrate the sense of the impossibility of ordinary spatial and visual verifications in such a place. In any case, I find the word "amorphous" far too abstract here, and an odd choice for a poet like Levertov who normally eschews such abstract vocabulary.) Ultimately, for Guillevic this experience is therefore one that defies language and the ability of the poet to distinguish things. In the very depths of unconscious matter the poet can no longer make utterance, again, because the unconscious is in *things*, not in language. By lapsing into silence we draw closer to the poetic than we would by continuing to speak. No doubt this is the point at which "we feel ourselves as eternity," the point at which the identification of oneself with nature is complete.

Here too is a point of stark contrast between Guillevic and Levertov, tonally and substantively, for where Guillevic draws close to the silence of ice, Levertov registers a more ecstatic experience. As pointed out at the outset, Levertov tends to view nature in its overlap with other contexts, and I cannot imagine her so forcefully positing an area more profound than language. Indeed, her "Relearning the Alphabet" makes it clear that for her even "the fire's core" is circumscribed by the possibility of some form of *parole*. Much of course has already been written about Levertov's traffickings in cabalistic ideas and practices, and I see no need to go into that dimension of her work here. (Perhaps her choice of the word "amorphous" to render the limit point in Guillevic between language and non-language is an unacknowledged editorialization about the existence of such a limit.) Suffice it to say that within the context of the mystery of vowels and letters, words and lines in movement, there remain some striking parallels with Guillevic's "In the Cave of Ice." "Relearning the Alphabet" begins with an epigraph from Heinrich Zimmer:

The treasure . . . lies buried. There is no need to seek it in a distant country. . . . It is behind the stove, the center of the life and warmth that rule our existence, if only we knew how to unearth it. And yet—there is this strange and persistent fact, that it is only after . . . a journey in a distant region, in a new land, that . . . the inner voice . . . can make itself understood by us. And to this strange and persistent fact is added another: that he who reveals to us the meaning of our . . . inward pilgrimage must be himself a stranger. . . . (RA 110).

One immediately takes note of the gnostic overtones in this quotation, with its reference to a stranger who accomplishes a

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movement from one world to another. And this stranger immediately becomes a figure of the poem in section A:

Joy—a beginning. Anguish, ardor.
 To relearn the ah! of knowing in unthinking
 joy: the beloved stranger lives. (RA 110)

But one also notes that the key metaphor of the paragraph is “a treasure [that] lies buried.” As in Guillevic, the call is to go under, to unearth the center and make efforts to dwell there, where under means “under consciousness.” This then is the project of the poem: to humanize the unhuman; to calm what was terrifying; to transform the unconscious into something livable. To be sure, there is a much more ecstatic understanding here of what matter amounts to *vis-à-vis* the unconscious. “To relearn the ah! of knowing in unthinking/joy”: here the unconscious is registered in its very unawareness as all the same the possibility of a joyous knowledge. Guillevic’s unconscious realm, on the other hand, is a place of hiding and crouching, a hunkering down for long periods in a darkness prior to distinction-making and language. Where Guillevic’s poems search out images like “cave” and “ice” to simultaneously name and exorcise the site of a terrible blindness, Levertov seeks the cave in order to glory in the visions that the contents of the unconscious are continually unfolding to us through matter. This visionary life is possible only through language, through the acts of poetry and of translation as they produce an inhabitable landscape, whether or not one is consciously aware that this is in fact what one is up to in the throes of such activity.

Denise Levertov: Among the Keys

DAVID SHAPIRO

I would like to speak of the rhythmical precisions of Denise Levertov, not to expose a metrical mania or pedantry, but to give a sense of the justice of her power. This rhythmic finesse might be said to be the synaesthetic component, because here the cadences, wandering caesuras, and musical discontinuities produce a painterliness. It is the oddity of Levertov's work that her most chromatic effects are precisely these tough and anxious shifts of rhythm, and that her polyrhythms, as it were, are more significant than certain aspects of her so-called subject matter. And one might go so far as to underline this cadential mastery as her particular topic, and place this musicality as an essential *eros* of the work. I am going to use the poetry selected for the canonic Donald M. Allen anthology in 1960, because it marked for me the repleteness of her work as well as its particularity among other poets.

One is attracted to the dashes and depths of "Beyond the End," and particularly the way the iamb is flouted, a lesson learned from William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and presumably Charles Olson, but here promoted almost to the abstract stage of becoming the "subject matter," not just, in Meyer Schapiro's terms, *content matter*. The process poem much touted in the age of the Abstract Expressionists has, I think, arrived here at some of its most overt propositions:

The 'hewers of wood' & so on; every damn
craftsman has it while he's working

but it's not
a question of work: some
shine with it, in repose. Maybe it is
response, the will to respond—('reason
can give nothing at all/like
the response to desire') maybe
a gritting of the teeth, to go

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just that much further, beyond the end
beyond whatever ends: to begin, to be, to defy.
(Allen 60-61)

The passages concerning a poetics have begun to take over the poem itself, very much as the act of staining the canvas had become for Helen Frankenthaler more than a ritual or a carving of shapes, but the act that most proposed the immanent as the naked subject matter of art. I think that this connects "Beyond the End" with those moments in Frank O'Hara's *Second Avenue*—really a book more than a poem, a book dedicated as much to Jackson Pollock as to Vladimir Mayakovsky—when the poetic line in its relations to spilled paint becomes the leading metaphor. Here the subject matter of rhythm becomes an intransigent force:

It's energy; a spider's thread: not to
'go on living' but to quicken, to activate: extend:

...

It has no grace like that of
the grass, the humble rhythms, the
falling and rising of leaf and star;
it's barely
a constant. Like salt:
take it or leave it

(60)

In "The Hands" there is another vivid metonymy offered for the act of musical construction. The hands are

slithering
among the keys.

(61)

And the "almost painful/movement" of the poem registers Levertov's erotic sense of the "actors at rehearsal," in their demotic costumes, or costumes of the demotic: "common clothes." The whole stage is democratic, flexible and unfixed. But the poem is particularly horrifying because from the beginning the poet has made it clear that the hands are horrible, oneiric, and fragmentary: "Don't forget the crablike/hands, slithering/among the keys." These haunted, uncanny hands are particularly *unheimlich* because of the homely rhythmical maneuvers of the line which slashes them into pieces: parts for the part.

Levertov is the master ironist of this music which "drifts you/off your feet : too easily let off." What would be the possibility of difficulty

AMONG THE KEYS

in this world but nakedly that of "painful/movement"? The enjambments are all ways of insisting on rhythmical breakdowns themselves: "a tension, as of/actors at rehearsal." Robert Creeley was to make this rhythmical indecision into the canonic proposals of anxiety that are, after all, his poetic. In Olson's hands such a consciousness of a rhythmical skepticism has mostly been used for purposes of pedagogy and epic affirmation. Levertov's poetics of difficulty, of painful movement, of slithering hands among the keys becomes, moreover, an urban vision, similar to that which Meyer Schapiro discovered in the intercepting planes of Degas and Pissarro as well as Mondrian.

"Merritt Parkway" is the most obvious neighbor or companion to these abstract pieces of natural and poetic rhythm. Here the effort in abstraction is likened to what Willem de Kooning called the "no-environment" of the city.

As if it were
forever that they move, that we
keep moving—

...
above our six lanes
the dreamlike continuum . . .

...
passing by, passing
the cars that
keep moving ahead of
us, past us, pressing behind us
and
over left, those that come
toward us shining too brightly
moving relentlessly
in six lanes, gliding
north & south, speeding with
a slurred sound—

(61-62)

This early poem, from 1954, seems to me a masterpiece of ambivalence concerning representation. It traffics in the traffic of a poem while continuing to be, after all, a plastic piece of naturalism concerning the deracinations of city and cars. On the one hand Levertov is here closer to the world of Williams's exact observations in baseball games, and his pure horrible products of American lunacy, but she is also already beginning to dissolve all traffic into the unmediated stain of a poetry announcing itself as impure movement. It is perhaps the tumultuous

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joy of this poem that it succeeds in being, at once, as abstract and colorful as one of Richard Diebenkorn's series based on the urban grid, and also that it is aware of the subject of *the human in trouble*:

And the people—ourselves
 the humans from inside the
 cars, apparent
 only at gasoline stops
 unsure,
 eyeing each other
 drink coffee hastily at the
 slot machines & hurry
 back to the cars
 vanish
 into them forever, to
 keep moving—

(62)

The luxury of such a poem is its close positioning, its geometrical congruence, in the device of traffic and the poetic cadences in which this poem makes its shape felt. The theme of movement is part of the sensuality of her "The Way Through," and its wit of *tedium vitae*: "The water flies in the halfwit's eye/who didn't move fast enough/Who do you think I am, a horse?/but we made it—." The naturalism of this landscape is radically altered by the staggering subjectivity of the end, and its uneconomical luxuries: "Drown us, lose us,/rain, let us loose, so,/to lose ourselves, to career/up the plunge of the hill." The end is unpunctuated ecstasy because the poem has veered so far away from any imagism à la H.D., which it might superficially resemble. The poem is more expansive in its passions, and even more about the "common clothes" of a demotic rhythmic burden: "he backs up/the old car again and CHARGES" (63). Note the capitals.

"The Third Dimension" is interesting in exactly the way it begins to loosen the burden of the sculptural. It looks more like a Spanish song, with the thrilling erotic violence of "They took and/split me open from/scalp to crotch, and/still I'm alive" (63). The rhymes are as funny and absurd as those attempted by early Ashbery as ways of traducing all the positive effect of rhyme: "'... the world's bounty.' Honesty/isn't so simple:/a simple honesty is/nothing but a lie" (63–64). All sorts of half-rhymes and what John Hollander has called poverty of *rime riche* act upon these lines to thwart any comfortable élan. "The third dimension/hides itself" (64). Particularly in this song of its occlusion,

where the volumetrics of cracked stones are immediately dissipated by the sense of "love/cracked me open/and I'm/alive to/tell the tale—but not/honestly" (64). And why does the poet confess that she cannot possibly be honest, sincere, one might add, positivistically a reporter? Because the words, and the rhythms, have changed such a report into song, into "The Peppertrees," into the rhythms that haunt our sense of cadence and conclusion, and lack of conclusion. This unrepaired sense of musical and non-discursive song haunts the "Scenes from the Life of the Peppertrees." Scenes from the life of the "real."

I think still of this poem as one of Levertov's masterpieces, despite the many volumes that have intervened, and despite the fact that one might accuse me of underlining the so-called "anthology" piece in its dusty *gloire*. But I am still dazzled by the freshness of this piece, by the sensuality of those "Cats . . . stretching in the doorways/sure of everything" (64). And I think that it is rare that Levertov has permitted herself so constant a humor that does not degenerate into whimsy: "The peppertrees/shiver a little" (65). There is a sequence here that startles with its non-narrative joy in dissemination, from the trees to a cat, to a defenselessly, humorously sleeping anti-hero: "He is good. /Let him sleep" (65). Landscape is animated, but the humor of the pathetic fallacy has become a hilarious device and topic:

But the third peppertree
is restless, twitching
thin leaves in the light
of an afternoon. After a while
it walks over and taps
on the upstairs window with a bunch
of red berries. Will he wake?
(65-66)

This little Keatsian ending, which does not exactly solve the problem of whether "he" wakes or sleeps, sleeps or dreams, whether he has been given a reprieve by way of the author, or vice versa, is a charming way of dissolving landscape into inscape, and yet somehow keeping up the more-or-less conventional charms of "a third dimension." Somehow we feel, at the end of the peppertree cadenzas, that this sequence has not accommodated either our rage for the real or our desperate desire to disappear into the relatively unreal. The poem keeps up a steady strain of objects that might be silhouettes of the real, but are, after all, somewhat concealed *by sound itself*:

The yellow moon dreamily
tipping buttons of light

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down among the leaves. Marimba,
marimba—from beyond the
black street.

 Somebody dancing,
somebody
 getting the hell
outta here.
(65)

The pleasures and sharks of her fictive world, the Goddess whom she conjures in a fairytale forest, are parts of a scene in which we are plucked “from close rooms” (68) into a power that is elemental, abstract, and removed from the dimensions, or perhaps pulverized within the dimensions, of the real: “I bit on a seed and it spoke on my tongue” (68). The movement of the sinister sharks is as sullen as this particular craft or art, at its proleptic best: “Dark/the sharp lift of the fins” (NAP 66). These hallucinatory movements, these delicate adjustments, are as fresh and final as anything later sought in elegy, politics, or prayer.

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Moistening Our Roots with Music: Creative Power in Denise Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus"

MARILYN KALLET

The sources of power in Denise Levertov's poem "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" are both ancient and contemporary, obvious and occult. Embodying myth and myth-making, the poem enacts its own genesis. Its rhythm and images continually remind us of beginnings: of the world, of language, and of poetry's birth from dance. Creation myths, according to Jungian scholar Marie-Louise Von Franz, have always had a stronger resonance than other mythic patterns: "Of a different class from other myths . . . they convey a mood which implies that what is said will concern the basic things of existence, something more than is contained in other myths. . . . Creation myths are the deepest and most important of all myths" (5). The telling of creation myths in many traditional societies forms a vital part of teaching the initiatory rituals. Such telling reenacts Creation, allowing the participants to experience renewal. In Levertov's poem, as in oral tradition poetry, language is active, effecting a sense of loss and renewal in the participant/reader. As the title promises, this is an Orphic hymn, sung by an initiate, one who celebrates Orpheus's gentle and powerful songs, who retells the Orphic story of death and rebirth. The mythic pattern of going underground, being buried like Persephone, being torn to pieces like the ancient corn god, and being remembered in ritual and song—this pattern is the vital nervous and circulatory system of the poem.

To revitalize an ancient myth is no small task. It would be impossible to narrate Orpheus's journey in a short poem, much less to evoke his famed music, or the spirit of his quest. But underlying and

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propelling the narrative, the sustained rhythm of Levertov's long poem permits a bodily and imaginative sense of loss and restoration. In its supple lines and precise rhythms, the poem approximates dance. It asks to be read out loud, and read as scored. In doing so, one has the feeling of inhabiting one's voice and body. There are few poems in contemporary literature which evoke this strong sense of physical and imaginative life on the move and in harmony. Among these are Charles Olson's "For Sappho, Back," and passages from his "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," as well as George Quasha's "Rilke's Third Elegy, Transposed," Robert Duncan's "Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake," and William Carlos Williams's "Rain." It is no coincidence that Olson and Rilke/Quasha also sing of death, dismemberment or tearing up of roots, and rebirth. This shamanic, initiatory theme has a hold on us, challenging our poets to bring to bear their most skilled use of rhythm.

Levertov's sources for poetry are contemporary as well as traditional and mythic. In the 1960s her work was strongly influenced by the theory and practice of projective verse as well as by the work of other innovative contemporary poets. Robert Duncan, who believed in poetry's magical qualities, and who had the most subtle ear for rhythm of any contemporary American poet, had a profound impact on Levertov's work. In addition, in her own writing on theory she quotes and assimilates Charles Olson's writings on projective verse. Some of Olson's ideas are particularly helpful in considering "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." According to Olson, the contemporary poet works in the "open field," listening for the form that is appropriate to each poem, rather than paying homage to inherited forms. The blank page is a charged field, a source of energy, for the poet who knows how to bring out its rhythmical life, to find the right "musical phrase" (Ezra Pound's term). "Kinetics," dynamism, the poem as "energy-discharge"—Olson's terms place emphasis on rhythm as the primary source of a poem's creative life. Along with Olson's theories, Levertov includes Gerard Manley Hopkins's "sprung rhythm" and "inscape" as having influenced her thinking about the dynamic quality and the sense of wholeness she expects from poetry. In harmony with sound and image, the rhythmical structure of each poem will tell its deepest story, inventing itself formally as the story unfolds. Robert Creeley's principle that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," says Olson, gives the poem its life (*Selected* 16).

Re-visioning Creeley and Olson, Levertov goes one step further by insisting on the magical quality of verse: "Form is never more than a

"A TREE TELLING OF ORPHEUS"

revelation of content" (PW 13). Like Duncan, Levertov believes in the innate and perfect form waiting to be embodied in the poem. Rather than on magic, Olson had focused on the sophisticated mechanics of listening for the poem, involving:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

and on sleekness and movement (*Selected* 19). There must be no flab, no waste of energy—on the contrary, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO ANOTHER." Levertov tones down Olson's line by presenting it in lower-case letters, but she refers to it as "the law" (PW 13). Olson's pronouncements help to describe Levertov's accomplishment in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus": like a mythic animal, the poem leaps into its dynamic and perfect shape, constantly on the move in the reader's imagination.

This sense of the poem as a living whole, with perfect being in musical language, conveys Levertov's own belief in "organic poetry." Levertov expands on Hopkins's terms "inscape" and "instress" to explain her own views on intrinsic form and on the poet's experience of the sensory, intellectual, and emotional process of perceiving the poem (PW 7). By a deep and careful listening for the "pulse" or beat or "horizon" of the poem, the poet intuitively feels the form of her poem as a whole (PW 12). In her theory and in her great long poem, Levertov integrates Olson's vigorous idea and his belief in the syllable as "king" with Duncan's clairvoyant listening and belief in magic. The poem itself is distinctly Levertov's, resonating beyond theories in its myth and music.

Levertov's journey to this sustained poem called for hard work, risk, and discipline. As a young writer she left England for America to be in the place where creating a new poetics was possible. She apprenticed herself to William Carlos Williams, visited with him and corresponded with him as his health permitted from 1951 until his death in 1963. In his touching and inspiring letters Williams urges her toward strict discipline: "Practice, practice practice! must be the practice of the artist. You have to write . . . practically in your sleep and leap out of bed day or night when the inevitable word comes to your mind: it may never come again." ("Letters" 167). Williams encourages her to write even without inspiration: "At times there's nothing to do but finger exercises. Maybe that's the end. For what dreadful encounter? Nothing may happen, I hope it never does—but if it does, your only chance of doing some arresting writing, something that the world is

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really waiting for with open arms, is to be ready" ("Letters" 164). The ominous tone of Williams's letter resulted from his own struggles with illness, and with his fear of losing his wife Flossie's love, as well as with political oppression: the communist "witch hunts" of the 1950s had targeted him, and *Life* magazine continued to glorify the testing of the hydrogen bomb with spectacular photographs. In Levertov's eloquent anti-Vietnam war poetry, with its language of "*life that wants to live*" (RA 92), we find a fulfillment of Williams's intuition that Levertov too will have a responsibility to deal with the serious crises of their times. The strong feeling evoked in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" may also be seen as a crisis of being. The poem itself is the dramatization of an inner crisis as well as its temporary resolution. A love poem, and a poem about the Muse, it tells us what the poet did while she was "waiting" for the Muse to come back. She learned to dance in a graceful, strenuous measure that far outstripped anything Williams had predicted for women poets ("Women can rarely do it" ["Letters" 165]).

Levertov's poem, as reproduced here, is widely available in her 1970 volume *Relearning the Alphabet*. However, her score is easier to follow on a large page — as in *Stony Brook 1/2*, where it first appeared — where clusters of words against a blank field transmit a picture of language interacting with silence. There we can more readily perceive the "open field" as well as the "winding figures the lyre's measure designed."

A Tree Telling of Orpheus

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began
 I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
 of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
 didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched,
 unmoving.

Yet the rippling drew nearer—and then
 my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if
 fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips
 were drying and curling.

Yet I was not afraid, only
 deeply alert.

I was the first to see him, for I grew
 out on the pasture slope, beyond the forest.
 He was a man, it seemed: the two
 moving stems, the short trunk, the two
 arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless
 twigs at their ends,
 and the head that's crowned by brown or gold grass,
 bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,
 more like a flower's.

He carried a burden made of
 some cut branch bent while it was green,
 strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this,
 when he touched it, and from his voice
 which unlike the wind's voice had no need of our
 leaves and branches to complete its sound,
 came the ripple.

But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
 stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
 as if rain

rose from below and around me
 instead of falling.

And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:

I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know
what the lark knows; all my sap
was mounting towards the sun that by now
had risen, the mist was rising, the grass
was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
deep under earth.

He came still closer, leaned on my trunk:
the bark thrilled like a leaf still-folded.
Music! There was no twig of me not
trembling with joy and fear.

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
 came into my roots
 out of the earth,
 into my bark
 out of the air,
 into the pores of my greenest shoots
 gently as dew
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.
He told of journeys,
 of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark,
 of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day
deeper than roots . . .
He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs,
 and I, a tree, understood words—ah, it seemed
my thick bark would split like a sapling's that
 grew too fast in the spring
when a late frost wounds it.

Fire he sang,
that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames.
New buds broke forth from me though it was full summer.
As though his lyre (now I knew its name)
were both frost and fire, its chords flamed
up to the crown of me.

I was seed again.

I was fern in the swamp.

I was coal.

And at the heart of my wood

(so close I was to becoming man or a god)

there was a kind of silence, a kind of sickness,

something akin to what men call boredom,

something

(the poem descended a scale, a stream over stones)

that gives to a candle a coldness

in the midst of its burning, he said.

It was then,

when in the blaze of his power that

reached me and changed me

I thought I should fall my length,

that the singer began

to leave me. Slowly

moved from my noon shadow

to open light,

words leaping and dancing over his shoulders

back to me

riverly sweep of lyre-tones becoming

slowly again

ripple.

And I

in terror

but not in doubt of

what I must do

in anguish, in haste,

wrenched from the earth root after root,

the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder—

and behind me the others: my brothers

forgotten since dawn. In the forest

they too had heard,

and were pulling their roots in pain
 out of a thousand years' layers of dead leaves,
 rolling the rocks away,
 breaking themselves
 out of
 their depths.
 You would have thought we would lose the sound of the lyre,
 of the singing
 so dreadful the storm-sounds were, where there was no storm,
 no wind but the rush of our
 branches moving, our trunks breasting the air.
 But the music!
 The music reached us.

Clumsily,
 stumbling over our own roots,
 rustling our leaves
 in answer,
 we moved, we followed.

All day we followed, up hill and down.
 We learned to dance,
 for he would stop, where the ground was flat,
 and words he said
 taught us to leap and to wind in and out
 around one another in figures the lyre's measure designed.
 The singer
 laughed till he wept to see us, he was so glad.
 At sunset

we came to this place I stand in, this knoll
 with its ancient grove that was bare grass then.
 In the last light of that day his song became
 farewell.
 He stilled our longing.
 He sang our sun-dried roots back into earth,
 watered them: all-night rain of music so quiet

we could almost
not hear it in the
moonless dark.
By dawn he was gone.
We have stood here since,
in our new life.
We have waited.
He does not return.
It is said he made his earth-journey, and lost
what he sought.
It is said they felled him
and cut up his limbs for firewood.
And it is said
his head still sang and was swept out to sea singing.
Perhaps he will not return.
But what we have lived
comes back to us.
We see more.
We feel, as our rings increase,
something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest
leaf-tips
further.
The wind, the birds,
do not sound poorer but clearer,
recalling our agony, and the way we danced.
The music!

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Orpheus, proto-poet, Thracian son of Kalliope, one of the Muses, Orpheus whose name alone is an invocation, consummate musician, the one who awakens things by singing and naming them, the beloved, the one whom creatures follow, Orpheus who sings his way down through the underworld to find Eurydice and then loses her again, the one who is torn apart by the Furies, whose head goes out to sea still singing—Orpheus the hero does not sing his own story for us. His initiate recounts for us the time when Paradise was at hand, when the Muse was close enough to touch. If Orpheus himself did the singing, could we bear the intensity? Humbly, like one of us, the tree begins its story at the beginning.

"White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began . . ." The poem opens with its song of emergence from silence and nothingness. The mood is charged with the solemnity of genesis myths. As Native American poet Scott Momaday states the law of creation: "A word has power in itself. It comes from nothing and gives origin to all things" (33). Levertov's music begins gradually with this overture. Through a series of negations, disbelief and rumor are dispelled:

When the rippling began
I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched,
unmoving.

By disclaiming literal and easy answers, the tree tells us that this story takes place within, and does not have to do with ordinary weather. Elsewhere Levertov has written about needing a "horizon note" or rhythmical focal point for her poetry, and she equates "horizon" with the underlying "pulse" of the poem (*PW* 12). In this sense the "treeless horizon" is the "open field" where the poet will begin to invent her form. Each line may be read as one beat, one measure of time elapsed, as Williams might have counted it (*Selected* 326–27). This predictable but flexible line comprises what Williams termed the "variable foot." Within a fairly steady rhythm, Levertov varies the patterns of stresses and the number of words and syllables per line. In this manner she can slow the pace or quicken it, placing rhythmical and visual emphasis on certain words.

The first line of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" gives us the poem's rhythmical building blocks, the primary possibilities, with two stresses ("White dawn."), one stress ("Stillness.") and three stresses, ("When the rippling began"). The three-stress passage without punctuation opens up the poem at the line's end, generating a rhythmical sense of

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possibilities that underscores content. Quoting Lewis Hyde, Robert Hass offers these metaphors as suggestions about rhythm and meanings: "Two is an exchange, three is a circle of energy," and he also quotes a statement on rhythm by Leonard Bernstein: "Two is the rhythm of the body, three is the rhythm of the mind (130, 125). In Levertov's poem the two-stressed phrases steady the rhythm in the first thirty lines, thumping like a heartbeat: *white dawn, sea-wind, white fóg, shórt trúnk, góld gráss*, etc. This emphasis shifts to three beats or more as the poem enters the deepest and most stirring sections of the narrative.

The two-line bridge between the first and second clusters of imagery has been set apart spatially, indented deeply. These lines draw our attention: "Yet I was not afraid, only/deeply alert." The shorter line carries rhythmical weight, with its heavy stress on "deep" and its stress on the second syllable of "alert." The stress on "deep" underscores poetry's ability to evoke a hypnotic state. "Alert" reminds us to focus with a clear mind on the text. Here the poet is describing her own state of mind as she composes, her own deep listening for the emerging patterns in the poem.

The narrative has described Orpheus's effect upon the tree. As the "ripple drew nearer" the tree felt scorched by dry heat. We learn to know the singer through the tree's vertical body, and from the outside in, from the bark to the sap. The speaker's knowledge of Orpheus is tactile and immediate: "my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if/fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips/were drying and curling." When the tree describes Orpheus from its non-cerebral perspective, the images are pleasing, allowing the musician/hero to come to life for us as in a fairy tale:

He was a man, it seemed: the two
moving stems, the short trunk, the two
arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless twigs at their ends,
and the head that's crowned by brown or gold grass,
bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,
more like a flower's.

Personification is the poet's obvious tool for evoking creative power. Ironically, here the tree personifies the human from its perspective, giving us a fresh image of ourselves. Only when one stops to think how difficult it is to accomplish personification in the twentieth century does the poem's magic become clear. The poet becomes midwife to the poem as she evokes in detail first the tree's body, then the echo, the man's body. The imagery gives us another paradigm for creation by its

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naming, its palpable evocation of the hero's body, much as oral tradition cultures restore the world by singing the praises of the God's body.

Believable personification, temporarily believable in the beautiful span of this long poem, conveys to us again our own life and the life of another creature. This ability to connect with other beings is what we have lost in contemporary society. Robert Duncan, for many years Levertov's close friend and mentor, states his convictions:

The modern mind has not only chickened out on God, on angels, on Creation, but it has chickened out on the common things of our actual world, taking the properties of things as their uses and retracting all sense of fellow creatureliness. Not only the presences of gods and ideas are denied, becoming for the modern man "supposed" experiences, but the presence of stones, trees, animals and even men as spiritual beings is exorcised in our contemporary common sense. (Truth 32)

The exclusion of women in Duncan's list of "spiritual beings" brings to our attention a certain historical lack of consciousness about issues of gender and their connection to language. Duncan's use of the supposedly universal "men," and Levertov's repeat of "brothers" to refer to all the "others," the trees, remind us that poets are not isolated from their times, though they may be forward-looking in many ways.

Levertov's images in the next cluster of words are spaced to evoke excitement; rhythmical, sexual energy reinforces sensual imagery. Though the tree is presumably a "he," with his "sap" rising, Orpheus is depicted as a nurturer, like Williams's wife Flossie, watering her plants in "Asphodel." The impression is one of androgyny and wholeness:

But it was now no longer a ripple (he had come near and
stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me
as if rain

rose from below and around me
instead of falling.

And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:

I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know
what the lark knows; all my sap

was mounting towards the sun that by now
had risen, the mist was rising, the grass
was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them
deep under earth.

Indeed, according to the lore about Orpheus, "his outstanding quality is gentleness amounting at times to softness." His influence "was always on the side of civilization and the arts of peace." He is a culture-giver, a nurturing spirit. Unlike Apollo, with whom he shares some attributes,

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Orpheus has no warrior attributes. The calm which surrounds him differs from the wildness of Dionysus, whose religion he perpetuated. "The power of the lyre was to soften the hearts of warriors and turn their thoughts to peace, just as it could tame the wildest of beasts" (Guthrie 40). In this light, Levertov's poem may be seen as a coded anti-Vietnam poem, and the "brothers" maybe the "warriors" that Levertov strongly wishes to calm and soothe, though the poem resists any single interpretation.

In this intriguing portion of the poem, form and content create aesthetic tension, for though the lines form a picture of descent, the refrain is about "sap" rising in unison with all creation. The verbs echo each other in the progressive present, falling, tingling, singing, mounting, rising, drying. Short three-stress phrases reinforce the theme of sensual "wetness" in "as if rain" and "all my sap." The picture of falling or descent in these lines reminds us of William Carlos Williams's triadic lines in "Journey to Love" (in *Pictures from Breughel*), but unlike Williams's lines Levertov's are not predictable. The form she creates is unique to this poem and can never be reused. Through the aesthetic tension this passage embodies we can feel creative life circulating through the poem and through us.

In the passages that follow, line endings are an obvious source of rhythmical energy; Levertov often splices a phrase to impel the reader forward: "Music! There was no twig of me not/trembling with joy and fear." Set on the line by itself, "trembling with joy and fear" gets dramatic emphasis, again signaling to us the poet's state of mind.

Levertov evokes the sensual experience of receiving language:

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
 came into my roots
 out of the earth,
 into my bark
 out of the air,
 into the pores of my greenest shoots
 gently as dew
and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning.

This evocation of receiving language through the body reminds us of Alicia Ostriker's study of contemporary women poets *Stealing the Language*; their extensive use of images of the body reveals a reliance on the body as a source of content and form for poetry. Adrienne Rich also expresses this reliance when she speaks tenderly of a woman who "is

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rehearsing in her body, hearing-out in her blood/ a score touched off in her perhaps by some words, a few chords . . . /a tale only she can tell" (74). Though Levertov's speaker addresses the "others" as "brothers," she shares with Rich and Ostriker a confidence in the body as a primary source of knowledge and creative power.

In the next movement of the poem the tree relates Orpheus's story "of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day/deeper than roots." The tree has become a new being through its acquisition of language; now he understands every word, and will be able to recount the story. Formally there are interesting juxtapositions here. A long line bearing only a faint caesura after "sapling's" conveys a quick pace: "it seemed/ my thick bark would split like a sapling's that grew too fast in the spring/ when a late frost wounds it." The juxtaposition of this long line against shorter ones gives more time and attention to the phrasing of the latter. Accordingly, the next line, "Fire he sang," is heavily stressed, with "fire" and "he sang" set up as rhythmical equivalents. The connection reminds us of the phoenix, another creature of mythic death and renewal.

Once again the tree rehearses its own being, singing the vertical song from the roots "up to the crown of me." The singer dreams back, in step-down lines that take him deeper into his history. He relives his beginnings:

I was seed again.
I was fern in the swamp.
I was coal.

In this short passage, Levertov pays homage to William's triadic line, the one he used to explore the descent myth in "Asphodel" (in *Pictures from Breughel*).

Levertov acknowledges that sometimes there are "rifts" in the poem despite the fact that Olson coached contemporary poets to permit no "slackness" in the lines. The next stanza contains the only "rift" in this poem. This time the step-down lines resort to "talk" rather than to music or enactment. The tree is "so close . . . to becoming man or a god" that it loses its fresh view and fierce energy, saying: "there was a kind of silence, a kind of sickness, something akin to what men call boredom." Rather than denying that this "rift" exists, Levertov leaves it in the poem as an obstacle to be overcome. As she sums up in her essay on organic poetry, "There must be a place in the poem for rifts too—(never to be stuffed with imported ore). Great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be

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crossed at all. The X factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps" (PW 13).

The leap to the next stanza is a leap into dizzying intensity, as well as a leap into loss and independence. The lines become more jagged, with more space between them, more emphasis on single words and phrases:

It was then,
 when in the blaze of his power that
 reached me and changed me
 I thought I should fall my length,
 that the singer began
 to leave me. Slowly
 moved from my noon shadow
 to open light.

Words weave back and forth across the poem, mirroring the "rivery sweep of lyre-tones becoming/slowly again/ripple."

The most fragmented, agitated passage of the poem ensues, rhythmically the poem goes deepest here. It is a difficult passage to discuss, not because it is technically complicated, but because looking closely at rhythm can be frightening. As Robert Hass states, "Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is a power. And power is political" (108). Rhythm reveals the unconscious, and here in the poem the unconscious speaks from its oldest and darkest layers. The tree sings of its loss and of being torn apart, prefiguring Orpheus's destiny:

And I
 in terror
 but not in doubt of
 what I must do
 in anguish, in haste,
 wrenched from the earth root after root,
 the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder—
 and behind me the others: my brothers
 forgotten since dawn.

The speaker develops a kind of stutter, a pattern of hesitations that he keeps struggling to move past. Levertov uses spacing and line ends as punctuation to signify pauses between the lines. In reading these lines aloud the body rocks forward on the phrases, and back into the silences. The correspondence between the theme of "wrenching" roots from the earth and the syncopated phrasing results in a strong sense of movement, a quickening of feeling, and a probing into the ancient, mythic depths of consciousness. Even so, this difficult movement is not

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yet over, for the singer tells us that all the trees go through this wrenching; through the sympathetic and contagious magic of poetry, the readers will also experience the drama of upheaval.

Orpheus's lyre reaches the "others":

In the forest
they too had heard,
and were pulling their roots in pain
out of a thousand years' layers of dead leaves,
rolling the rocks away,
breaking themselves
out of their depths.

The poem becomes all action as language tries to follow inspiration, to hold on to the Muse. The images and rhythm underscore upheaval and call to mind a similar passage in Rilke's "Third Elegy," transposed by George Quasha. The passage sings of the poet's turmoil; the modern poet goes through an initiatory experience of descent and dismemberment privately, within:

—How he
gave himself to it
—Loved.
Loved his inner world, his inner jungle,
that primal forest within
on whose dumb overthrownness
greenlit his heart stood
Loved. Left it, continued
into his own roots and out
into violent beginning
where his small birth was
already outlived
: Descended
lovingly into older blood into gorges
where great Fright lurked still full of fathers
(206-07)

Here as in Levertov's poem the myth of descent is enacted rhythmically, spatially, as well as in the imagery. These lines give us a picture of what has been traditionally described as "hell," the underworld. But the poet is happy there: "Horror smiled at him" (207). In Levertov's poem the trees suffer the physical pain of tearing out their roots, and yet their focus is music, not pain:

You would have thought we would lose the sound of the lyre,
of the singing,
so dreadful the storm-sounds were, where there was no storm,
no wind but the rush of our

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branches moving, our trunks breasting the air.

But the music!

The music reached us.

The music is so compelling that the trees must follow, "clumsily, stumbling over our own roots." Like Baudelaire's albatross, another figure for the poet himself, the trees become clumsy creatures when they move out of their element. But they are destined to follow the Muse. And despite their awkwardness they learn "to dance." Orpheus teaches them, step by step, combining words and movements in the dance: "and words he said/taught us to leap and to wind in and out/around one another in figures the lyre's measure designed." The Muse sings his farewell, but leaves gently, calming the trees by nurturing them with his song:

In the last light of that day his song became
farewell.

He stilled our longing.

He sang our sun-dried roots back into earth,
watered them: all-night rain of music so quiet

we could almost

not hear it in the

moonless dark.

Preparing to end the poem, Levertov provides quiet music in the manner of Orpheus, who, like Apollo, was noted for generating calmness. In this passage we can see the importance of each syllable toward the rhythm of the whole poem. Where Levertov separates the article from the noun in "the/moonless dark" we pay close attention to this change in ordinary syntax. The separation highlights the image of "moonless dark," placing a heavy stress on "moon" and again on "dark." Both rhythmically and in terms of the picture the line makes, the phrasing makes sense. Without moonlight the scene returns to darkness; without an article, the line's music conveys smoothness and preparation to begin the creative cycle again.

The narrative voice of the poem repeats "it is said" to tell of Orpheus's unsuccessful journey to the underworld, and his triumph in singing beyond his doom. The tree becomes philosophical about pain as a source of learning and creative power:

Perhaps he will not return.

But what we have lived

comes back to us.

We see more.

We feel, as our rings increase,

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something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest
further. leaf-tips

The wind, the birds,
do not sound poorer but clearer,
recalling our agony, and the way we danced.
The music!

The ending soothes us. The singer is gone, but we find no end to the music—it resonates into silence. We feel as if we stand at the edge of a calm lake, whose depths we have glimpsed, watching the ripples subside. Everything seems “clearer” as the world is restored through music. The three beats of “We see more” emphasize the spiritual action of the whole poem, which is to journey through darkness to clarity. Like the shaman and the seer, the poet and the reader go through the initiatory cycle of passing through the “moonless dark” in order to see with new eyes. One thing we see is Levertov’s vision of the poem as movement, as an extended “dance figure” left in wake of the Muse.

In its refusal to be a still life, an object, Levertov’s poem represents one of the more interesting incarnations of poetry in the twentieth century. For one hallmark of poetry today is change, movement, and a focus on the moment, rather than on the poem as a single lyric object, a focus on “kinetics” rather than on trying to build monuments against time. Levertov’s poem represents a graceful encounter with time, a ballet embracing both change and constancy: “What does not change/is the will to change” (Olson, “As the Dead” 2). In “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” Levertov is both the choreographer and the performer of her vision—her work becomes what Yeats summoned, the supple dancer and the dance. As readers we are invited to join in, to complete the score with our voices, to actively celebrate poetry and the imagination in our time.

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Levertov and Rilke: A Sense of Aesthetic Ethics

EDWARD ZLOTKOWSKI

It is ironic that at the very beginning of her career one of the poets with whom Denise Levertov was immediately associated was the Czech poet Rainer Maria Rilke. As Harry Marten has noted:

Kenneth Rexroth, an early anthologizer of her work, linked her loosely with a diverse group of post-Second World War British neoromantic poets whose work exhibits a "ruminative melancholy" of the sort displayed in Stephen Spender's and J.B. Leishman's popular and influential translations of . . . Rainer Maria Rilke. . . . Noting that this sort of verse has a "dreamy, nostalgic sorrow about it . . ." Rexroth observed that "in poets like Denise Levertov this poetry reaches its height in slow, pulsating rhythms, romantic melancholy, and undefined nostalgia. (8-9)

What makes this association ironic is the listing of qualities on which it is based. For although Levertov's apparent affinity with Rilke did in fact develop into a lifelong connection, that connection rests on entirely different grounds than those suggested above.

Levertov herself has spelled out in considerable detail the history of her interest in Rilke. In the concluding essay of *Light Up the Cave*, "Rilke as Mentor," she describes how she "had already been writing for many years, and had been reading Rilke for seven or eight, when I first came to America and began to read Williams, Pound, and Stevens" (283). Indeed, as decisive as was the influence of the last three—especially William Carlos Williams—on her subsequent development,

all the useful and marvelously stimulating technical and aesthetic tendencies that I came upon in the 1950s were absorbed into a ground prepared not only by my English and European cultural

background in general but more particularly by Rilke's concept of the artist's task. (283)

Thus Rilke helped prepare the cultural and conceptual ground in which all these new tendencies so fruitfully grew.

But he did more. In many respects he also helped Levertov attain that very balance which has been fundamental to her achievement as a poet—the balance between what she has called her “sense of the pilgrim way” and her “new, American, objectivist-influenced, pragmatic, and sensuous longing for the Here and Now” (PW 69). For if Williams can be viewed as the main source of the latter, Rilke must be viewed as a primary source of the former, as perhaps the single most important spokesman for *inner* experience, for the translation of the visible into the invisible—for the transcendence of simple mimesis in favor of spiritual realization.

It was early in 1947, according to Levertov, that she began making her own index for Rilke's *Selected Letters*, “in many ways the most important . . . book of Rilke's that I obtained” (LC 284). And one of the passages she not only indexed but underlined¹ is the famous passage where Rilke describes “our task” as

to impress this fragile and transient earth so sufferingly, so passionately upon our hearts that its essence shall rise up again, invisible, in us. We are the *bees of the Invisible*. . . . The [Duino] Elegies show us engaged on this work, the work of perpetual transformation of beloved and tangible things *into the invisible vibration and excitability of our nature*. (*Selected Letters* 394)

If, then, such “transformation” is our task—a task incumbent upon not just artists but human beings in general²—it is impossible that any kind of merely “documentary realism” (PW 90) should satisfy. Though one begins with a passionate attention to things, one does not remain trapped in a world of objects precisely because one's attention is so passionate.³ On more than one occasion, Levertov quotes with approval Rilke's insistence that

If a thing is to speak to you, you must for a certain time regard it as the only thing that exists, the unique phenomenon that your diligent and exclusive love has placed at the center of the universe, something the angels serve that very day upon that matchless spot. (PW 97, LC 97)

For only “ecstatic attention,” “intensity” can transcend “banalities” of form and language and “penetrate [material] to its reality”:

The word ecstasy is the key here; but it must be recognized that I am not asking for a poetry *about* ecstasy. . . . No, what I am

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talking about is on the contrary an ecstasy of attention, a passion for the thing known. . . . (PW 97-98)

Thus in a very real sense the quality of a work of art is a function of the quality of the experience that underlies it. And the way in which one works—one's task as an artist—depends upon the way in which one lives—one's task as a human being. "With only a slight degree of hyperbole" (LC 284) could Rilke claim:

Verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings (we have those soon enough); they are experiences. In order to write a single poem, one must see many cities, and people, and things; one must get to know animals and the flight of birds, and the gestures that flowers make when they open in the morning. . . . There must be memories of many nights of love, each one unlike the others. . . . And still it is not yet enough, to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the immense patience to wait till they are come again. For the memories themselves are still nothing. Not till they have turned to blood within us . . . not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (Quoted in PW 109-10.)

Rilke's importance for Levertov, then, consists first and foremost in the way in which he confirmed and strengthened her commitment to the primacy of intense personal experience:

That was my first lesson from Rilke—*experience* what you live; to the artist, whatever is *felt through* is not without value, for it becomes part of the ground from which one grows. (LC 284)

Hence one must understand Levertov's special fondness for that phrase from the *Letters to a Young Poet* in which Rilke warns against the dangers of "unlived . . . life, of which one can die" (63-64). Again and again, in her poetry as well as her prose, she returns to this fundamental admonition to embrace one's life as fully as possible.⁴ In a poem entitled "The Old Adam," "the old man who has failed his memory"

acts out
the bent of his life,
the lost way
never looked for, life
unlived, of which he is dying
very slowly. (OTS 48)

This mere "acting out" of the "bent of one's life" is, we may be sure, the very antithesis of the "pilgrim way" referred to above. But, in a more specifically aesthetic context, it is also the antithesis of an idea Levertov has referred to several times as absolutely central to any understanding

of Rilke's influence on her—something she has described as “a sense of aesthetic ethics”:

This kind of influence, first on a young beginner, and then throughout the life of a working artist, represents one of the most deeply useful kinds of mutual aid. It is an influence not on style, not on technique, but on the attitude towards one's work that must underlie style and craft. . . . Rilke presents to any young poet an example of basic attitude that can remain relevant throughout a lifetime because it is reverent, passionate, and comprehensive. . . . Because he articulated a view of the poet's role that has not lost its significance as I have read and reread Rilke's prose for almost four decades, he remains a mentor for me now as he was when I was a young girl. (LC 289)

In exploring this sense of aesthetic ethics, we might perhaps best proceed by discussing its implications, first, for the poet himself/herself and, second, for the individual work of art.

After the concept of “experience,” few concepts play as pervasive or pivotal a role in Levertov's aesthetics as that of “necessity.” And without claiming that Rilke was the source of this concept, we can safely maintain that he helped both to establish and to clarify its significance. For after C. F. MacIntyre's volume of translations, *50 Selected Poems*, the next Rilke Levertov read was the *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Here, of course, it is in Letter I that he speaks at more length, and more specifically, about the needs of the poet than in any of the other ten. (LC 284)

She goes on to explain that the first underlying “need” relevant to the poet is a personal sense of “calling,” the conviction that one was meant to write—indeed, that one *must* write (LC 285). Hence, she speculates, it was perhaps the very recognition that Herr Kappus (the recipient of Rilke's letters) “was not *destined* for the life of art” (emphasis added) that led Rilke to confine his comments on this subject largely to his first letter. In any event, the concept of “destiny” or “calling” is never far away when either Rilke or Levertov discusses artistic beginnings. Though Levertov's gently humorous description of her reaction to the acceptance of her first book (“I remember going into a church . . . to kneel in awe because my destiny . . . was beginning to happen” [CEP viii]) differs radically in tone from Rilke's theatrical “O you mothers of poets. You chosen resorts of the Gods, in whose womb even the Unheard of must have been concerted” (WSR 58), their premises are, in fact, closely related.⁵

But though destiny is the hallmark of the first "necessity" Levertov learned from Rilke, destiny does not imply some automatic finality. In time she came to recognize

that when he says Herr Kappus ought to continue only if he could honestly answer "Yes" [to the question "*Must I write?*"], he meant the question (for every poet) to be a perennial one, not something asked and settled once and for all. (LC 285)

For the recognition that one is specially chosen confers a sense not just of tremendous privilege but also of tremendous obligation. As Levertov says in an "Address to New York City High School Prizewinners,"

When one discovers that one has a gift for writing poetry it's a solemn and also a deliriously exciting moment. . . . One feels chosen—and if one has an adequate recognition of poetry being something larger than oneself, one feels a sense of dedication to the calling of poet.

What such a sense of dedication entails is nothing less than personal subordination to the demands of one's art. Hence, as the passage goes on to explain,

And because of this dedication a poet learns to revise, to work at his or her own poem until it is as perfect as it can be. Not in order to show off, to compete with others, to demonstrate personal cleverness, but for the sake of poetry itself. You can't *make* a poem happen, but once it begins to happen you can help it become complete. It's a little bit as if the poet were a sort of photographic developing medium. (LC 79)

The positive technological image is a little unusual for Levertov—elsewhere her language is much more traditional: the poet as "[instrument] on which the power of poetry plays" (PW 3), as "priest," with the poem as "a temple" where "epiphanies and communion take place" (PW 47). But regardless of the specific image involved, the underlying conception is always the same: poets don't "make" poetry; poetry makes poets: it calls them to its service, and it invites them to obey.

What does it mean to obey? The second "necessity" Levertov learned from Rilke provides the beginning of an answer:

Likewise, when, in the same letter [Letter I, quoted above], [Rilke] states that "a work of art is good only if it has grown out of necessity," he is not merely repeating that injunction [i.e., to ask "*Must I write?*"]; the first imperative had to do with an initial sense of being drawn to the making of poems, while this second

one demands that the poet apply the same standard to each separate work. (LC 285)

Thus the emphasis shifts from poet to poem, from general activity to specific creation. And just as poetry exists apart from the poet, so the poem exists apart from the poet's need for self-expression. Indeed, the poem is anything but a direct reflection of its maker. It is, instead, an autonomous creation, an independent, self-contained other:

The condition of being a poet is that periodically . . . a cross section, or constellation, of experiences . . . demands, or wakes in him this demand: the poem. The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate.

So—as the poet stands openmouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem. . . . It is faithful attention to the experience from the first moment of crystallization that allows those first or those forerunning words to rise to the surface: and with that same fidelity of attention the poet, from that moment of possibility of being let in to the poem, must follow through, letting his experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes. (PW 8–9)

“There comes to him”; “allows . . . to rise to the surface”; “being let in . . . must follow through”—these are the fruits of active surrender, for as Rilke says in a passage underlined by Levertov: “I must wait for the ringing in the silence, and I know that if I force the ringing, then it really won't come” (*Selected Letters* 15).

But this waiting, this following, this surrender is not merely a necessary condition of bringing forth; it is also a primary source of joy:

To the artistic sensibility, process is of intense interest, and though the goal is the finished work, the passion and the pleasure . . . is in the making of the work and not in the having finished it. (LC 89)

And here too Rilke's example reigns supreme. For as Levertov points out, his “emphasis on ‘experience,’ on living one's life with attention, is always balanced by an equal emphasis on the *doing* of one's art work, a zeal for the doing of it” (LC 287). Thus we can begin to understand her judgment that it was he who was “the most devoted of poets, the one who gave himself most wholly to the service of his art” (PW 112).

There is, finally, a third kind of necessity that Levertov found in Rilke, a necessity he does not explicitly articulate in his letters to Kappus, but which nonetheless is “amply manifest” in all his work:

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attention to the "aesthetic needs of each poem—each line" (LC 285). And here one sees most clearly how ironic—how misleading—is the Levertov-Rilke association with which we began—an association based on "ruminative melancholy," "dreamy, nostalgic sorrow," "undefined nostalgia." For however aptly these qualities may characterize Levertov's earliest verse (and she herself has readily conceded its debilitating "vagueness" [LC 33]), however aptly they may also characterize the Leischman-Spender translations of Rilke—and the general sense of him held by writers like Robert Creeley (LC 283)—they are, in fact, utterly foreign to Levertov's core understanding of Rilke. "He was a poet, and so, of course, abhorred the approximate," she quotes Rilke as saying of another writer (LC 271). And, indeed as any reader of Rilke's letters knows, he did constantly hammer home the utter necessity of precision. For example, in a passage singled out by Levertov he writes: "The *thing* is definite, the art-*thing* must be still more definite; removed from all accident, reft away from all obscurity" (*Selected Letters* 31–32).⁶

"Removed from all accident"—no phrase better captures Levertov's approach to questions of technique. For since a poem is an "autonomous existence" (LC 60), every aspect of that existence must possess the same functional integrity possessed by the parts of our own bodies (PW 3). Hence technical questions can never be resolved subjectively, arbitrarily, but only through exact attention paid to the autonomous other emerging by means of the poet's sensibility:

The progression seems clear to me: from Reverence for Life to Attention to Life, from Attention to Life to a highly developed Seeing and Hearing, from Seeing and Hearing . . . to the Discovery and Revelation of Form, from Form to Song.⁷ (PW 55)

Even as each poem finds its origin in the poet's attention to something crystallizing in him and yet beyond him, so each detail of the poem's form finds its origin in his fidelity to the details of that experience. What Rilke's third necessity ultimately points to is a kind of "deep mimesis."

Because so many of Levertov's essays on poetic technique reflect such an understanding, it would be hard to overestimate its importance. Indeed, unless one gives it its due, one may fail to appreciate fully the seriousness with which she takes matters such as line breaks, indentations, punctuation—not to mention sound, rhythm, and diction. One may also fail to appreciate fully her sense of exasperation with those who seem to regard technical matters as largely a matter of taste. The "melodic element is not merely an ornamental enhancement but, deriving as it does from the mimesis of mind process, is fundamentally

expressive" (LC 73). Hence, though a "lot of people write in what have come to be called 'open forms,' [they do so] without much sense of why they do so or what those forms demand" (LC 70). They do so without realizing that "everything, down to the last hyphen, should [contribute] to the life of the poem" (LC 76).⁸

Given all that has been said so far—the primacy of authentic experience, the indispensability of attention, the focus upon precision of notation—it is hardly surprising that Levertov appends, as it were, a fourth "necessity" to the three already discussed:

Another lesson from Rilke which reinforced something I knew already concerned the value of solitude. . . . I had learned as a child to enjoy being alone; now I saw how Rilke pointed to solitude as necessary for the poet's inner development, for that selfhood that must *be* in order to experience all the multifold otherness of life. (LC 285–86)

One must be careful, however, not to confuse such "solitude" with either social isolation or personal self-absorption. Indeed, it would seem to represent the very antithesis of the latter, being the necessary condition of experiencing "otherness." Furthermore, as we noted earlier, both Levertov and Rilke emphatically reject all poetry that is merely self-expressive.

A self-expressive act is one which makes the doer feel liberated, "clear" in the act itself. . . . They satisfy the performer momentarily. But they are not art. And the poet's "making clear" . . . is art: it goes beyond (though it includes) the self-expressive verbal effusion, as it goes beyond the ephemeral gesture; it is a construct of words that *remains* clear even after the writer has ceased to be aware of the association that initially impelled it. (PW 47)

With this we can compare a passage from Rilke's letter of March 24, 1926, to Hans Ulbricht—a letter Levertov marked off in its entirety:

Above all, you must fashion beside the pen intended to furnish your friends with the signs of your doing and striving, a second pen which you will treat like a tool. . . . The workmanlike output which this other pen adumbrates should not work back into your own life, should be a design, an alchemy, a transmutation of which the "I" was only the first and last stimulus, but which from then on remains facing you. (*Selected Letters* 402)

For both poets, then, solitude is merely the condition that makes "work" possible, and "work" means a transcendence of the self. Those who fail to understand this essentially betray themselves as well as their calling.⁹

This image occurs in a short piece of Rilke's entitled "Concerning the Poet," a parable in which, says Levertov, "the task of the poet, in society and within the individual, is defined in a figurative form that provides a lifetime's matter for thought and wonder" (*WSR* iv). In prose this is all Levertov has to say about this image, but in a recent poem she deals further with it. The poem is worth quoting in full.

Once, in dream,
 the boat,
pushed off from the shore.
You at the prow were the man—
all voice, though silent—who bound
rowers and voyagers to the needful journey,
the veiled distance, imperative mystery.

All the crouched effort,
 creak of oarlocks, odor of sweat,
 sound of waters
 running against us
 was transcended: your gaze
 held as we crossed. Its dragonfly blue
 restored to us
 a shimmering destination.

I had not read yet of your Nile journey,
the enabling voice
drawing the boat upstream in your parable.
Strange that I knew
your silence was such a song. (DH 3)

The significance of this poem is heightened by its position: it is the first poem in *A Door in the Hive*, and as such balances the strong Rilke presence at the book's end (see note 15). Indeed, its significance is further heightened by its title, for Levertov has addressed no other poem to Rilke—despite her acknowledging his role as mentor over fifteen years ago. Here, however, if we assume the poem's speaker is indeed Levertov, that omission is more than corrected, for both the archetypal nature of the dream and its remarkably "prophetic" power make abundantly clear Rilke's privileged place in her psyche.¹¹

If we ask, next, what exactly defines the poet, the figure at the poem's core, we are answered at once by a striking paradox: "You at the prow were the man—/all voice, though silent." And this same paradox is repeated in the poem's last line: "your silence was such a song." That a poet should be defined by his voice, his song, is only to be expected, but in this case the voice and the song are silent—completely internal. One is reminded of the well-known lines from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

As so much we have seen so far serves to indicate, the poet operates on a plane that transcends sense particulars, however much he may love and operate through those particulars. Hence, in a way his song is always essentially "silent," a song piped "not to the . . . ear," but "to the spirit."

But though the poet's voice, in this case, remains completely internal, it is not for that matter any less functional or effective. In stanza one it is a force of inner social coherence, the power that binds "rowers and voyagers to the needful journey." This phrase, associated as it is with "veiled distance" and "imperative mystery," recalls for us Rilke's role in "A Sense of Pilgrimage," where Levertov credits him with having helped support her commitment to life as "pilgrim way" or spiritual quest.

In the middle stanza of the poem we are given another, still more specific example of the poet's ability to transcend sense particulars. Here, however, it is not his voice but his "gaze" or vision that is his vehicle of expressiveness and effectiveness. "Your gaze/held as we crossed" suggests an almost tangible lifeline on which the meaning (and success) of all more localized movements are dependent. Not only does the poet bind us to the mystery of life's journey, he also sustains us, restores to our actions a larger sense of purpose and "destination."

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Finally, in the third stanza, the speaker places this mythic dream-image explicitly in the context of Rilke's own parable, "Concerning the Poet." There, we are told, it is the poet's "enabling voice" that actually "[draws] the boat upstream." Thus, still another poetic function is identified, and although this final function technically belongs only to Rilke's original, the speaker gives us no reason to doubt that she too affirms it. From inner bonding to maintenance of vision to some kind of direct responsibility for spiritual movement, the poet provides a range of benefits that justify his position at society's "prow."

Turning now directly to Rilke's parable, we can identify still other ideas relevant to the poet's social role. And since, as we have seen, Levertov's endorsement of that piece could hardly be more enthusiastic, those ideas may shed some more light on her sense of the poet's function.

One of the most striking aspects of Rilke's narration that finds little reflection in Levertov's poem is the attention it devotes to the boat's rowers. For although these figures neither guide nor steer, they are not reduced to some blind, mechanical propulsive force: "But sometimes, looking up quickly, one could catch one of them deep in thought" (WSR 64). In other words, Rilke suggests that the rowers carry within themselves their own rich inner life, as "degraded" and undeveloped as it may be. Hence the power of spiritual binding and sustaining identified in Levertov's poem does find appropriate human material to interact with.

And interact it does—even if, as Rilke makes clear, the man in the prow never actually focuses on the rowers or deliberately intends to intervene in their lives.

But at times an unpredictable intervention, felt by all of us in a most peculiar manner, not only helped them rhythmically, but quite perceptibly transformed the powers within them, as it were, so that, being eased, they brought fresh, still untouched sources of strength into play. (65)

This, of course, is a direct result of the man's song, for in Rilke's version he is anything but mute: "He sang suddenly, at quite irregular intervals, and by no means always when exhaustion increased. . . but even then it was the right thing; even then it was appropriate" (65).¹² Thus the poet, while seeming externally removed from the work of society ("They were all behind him, he rarely looked backwards, and was not affected when he did so" [65]), nonetheless stands in a powerful mystical relationship to it—a relationship that allows him to empower it, as it were, incidentally, merely as a function of his being who he is: "What did

seem to influence him was the pure movement of his feeling when it met the open distance" (66).

One can hardly imagine more eloquent testimony to the deeply spiritual nature of the poet's social role. Nor do we need to look far to find confirmation of this view. As Levertov says in a 1979 interview:

This brings us back to part of your question about the social obligation of the writer to the people, the audience, the potential audience. I feel that that obligation resides in the utmost obligation to art. The first loyalty of the artist must be to the art. Through the exercise of that loyalty she can serve the people; and as a political animal, as a social being, an artist may have a profound desire to serve the people; but I think that the artist must recognize that the best way of doing so is in a sense indirectly, not by the deliberate effort to serve the people but by the deliberate effort to serve the art.¹³

Surely this is a statement worthy of the singer in the prow.

It remains for us to discuss briefly the Levertov-Rilke relationship implied by the assorted variations Levertov has written on Rilke originals. And since all but one of these variations belong to either *Breathing the Water* or *A Door in the Hive*, the first thing they imply is the vigor of Levertov's continuing interest in her predecessor.¹⁴ Indeed, with both books framed by works related to Rilke, one can safely assert that at no other point in her poetic career has Levertov's interest in Rilke been so much in evidence.¹⁵

However, Levertov's first variation, "People at Night" (based on a Rilke poem by the same name: "*Menschen bei Nacht*"), is of much earlier vintage, having been published in her first American volume, *Here and Now*. And yet, despite the fact that it was written some forty years ago, "People at Night" (CEP 33-34) displays a relationship to its model in some ways quite similar to that displayed by its much later successors. For example, where Rilke posits a general/generic truth: nights (or Night) are not the domain of the crowd, Levertov explores a specific—if indeterminate—occasion: "A night" (emphasis added). And in accord with this distinction, Rilke develops directly the spiritual implications of his idea while Levertov documents two relatively concrete socio-cultural scenes (at the movies and at someone's apartment) whose particulars then give rise to existential uncertainties. In Levertov's case the poem can be said to operate on a primary phenomenal level that serves as a springboard to a more general, interior dimension. In Rilke's poem the theme is handled in such a way that the inner immediately appears

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inseparable from the outer. The difference is not unlike that between an opaque object with a separate front and a back, and an object that is transparent.

It should be stressed here that we are not talking about differences in complexity or depth of insight but only about differences in approach: with Rilke one immediately sees the spiritual dimension as essential to what the object is; with Levertov one immediately sees the object's sensuous reality—only to be led beyond that reality. Thus, in the first of the later pairs of original and variation—*The Book of Hours*, I, 1, first stanza and “A certain day. . .”—Rilke's four-line sketch of artistic election and initiation becomes the focus of Levertov's entire variation—a variation in which Rilke's mystical event is specified and concretized. This is not to imply that the event becomes any less mystical in Levertov's hands, only that it is almost immediately grounded in a world of sensuous phenomena.¹⁶

Related to this fundamental difference are other distinctions. Not only do Levertov's sensuous details help provide a distinct physical base, they also contribute to a cultural critique. In her variation on Rilke's *The Book of Hours*, poem 8 (DH 41), that critique is oblique—implied in references to “Familiar powers” who extend “fingers of bone” and “exchange dark looks” while “sleepers/watch and listen.”¹⁷ But in other variations it is closer to the surface—in her reference to “the machine that supplies meaningless laughter” (*The Book of Hours*, Poem 7, BW 83), in the lines

Our cities pulverize, proud technologies
spawn catastrophe. The jaws of our inventions
snap down and lock. (*The Book of Hours*, Poem 15, DH 107)

Clearly there is nothing comparable in Rilke's originals. Hence, although it is usually possible to link Levertov's critique to some suggestion in the original German, that critique must, for the most part, be regarded as her own added dimension.

Partially as a result of this additional dimension of social critique, Levertov's variations often suggest a darker overall tone than do their originals. But there is another factor at work here. We stressed above that Levertov's tendency carefully to ground her vision in sensuous specifics in no way implies a flattening out of the interior, spiritual dimension of her experience. This being said, the fact remains that in Rilke's originals the spiritually *transcendent* possesses an appeal and an accessibility largely foreign to the variations. For Levertov, whatever hope we human beings possess always appears unambiguously rooted in

our actions in the world. We have, in the end, no choice but to deal with the reality—the entire reality—we have made. And this necessity of coping with—rather than transcending—the full weight of human mortality adds to the variations' generally more somber tone.

Nowhere do we find this element of “metaphysical realism” more emphatically at work than in the variation that concludes *Breathing the Water*: “Variation and Reflection on a Theme by Rilke” (emphasis added). For although some of the other variations differ significantly from their models, none of them sets out so deliberately to “answer” its model. Indeed, even before we reach the poem's antiphonal “Reflection,” the way in which Levertov “varies” the last two lines of the original's first stanza already anticipates that response. Whereas in Rilke the speaker tells us he could in his mind encompass God if only the noise his senses made did not prevent him from awakening (*wenn das Geräusch, das meine Sinne machen, / mich nicht so sehr verhinderte am Wachen*” (*Werke* 12), Levertov provides instead

[If just for once] my bustling senses, taking a deep
breath

fell silent

and left my attention free at last . . . (BW 83)

And this shift in underlying image—from the possibility of awakening (to a world) beyond the senses to the possibility of the senses' suspending their business so as to allow undivided attention—implicitly establishes the fundamental difference between the two works. For Levertov, even the possibility of “redemptive vision” can only be described as a function of the here and now.¹⁸

Thus it is hardly surprising that the reflection proper begins with the unequivocal assertion: “There will never be that stillness.” For as the speaker goes on to say, time is literally in our pulse, in our blood: it is the very element by means of which we make life: “We must breathe time as fish breathe water.” Although the speaker in Rilke's poem does not claim he can in fact waken to the transcendent, his wish remains an open possibility. In Levertov's variation every hint of transcendent “escape” must be rejected. Our temporality circumscribes us as definitely as does our socio-cultural awareness.

It would not be difficult to cite other examples of this difference in “metaphysical sensibility.” In the fourth poem of *The Book of Hours* the speaker suggests a profound disjunction between the work of the hands and the vision of the heart (“*Denn dich* [the rising sun] *verhüllen unsre*

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frommen Hande, /sooft dich unsre Herzen offen sehn" (Werke 101). In Levertov's variation, however, every hint of tension between without and within has been resolved in a creative dialectic:

[A holy place's] windows' ruby
and celestial sapphire can be seen
only from inside, but then
only when light enters from without. (BW 71)

In Rilke's fifteenth poem the speaker confesses that, despite human-kind's insignificance, he still can sometimes in dream take in the expanse of the divine ("Aber manchmal im Traum/kann ich deinen Raum/uberschaun" (Werke 18). In Levertov's variation no such daring assertion appears. Instead, we hear merely of a "hunger"

to offer up
our specks of life as fragile tesserae
towards the vast mosaic—temple, eidolon. (DH 107)

In short, as often as Rilke's originals suggest the possibility of a visionary leap, just so often do Levertov's variations insist upon the necessity of a fully incarnate vision—with all the limitations and blessings such a vision implies.¹⁹

Clearly one should not overgeneralize or exaggerate the scope of this distinction. The comparison we have been sketching pertains only to selections from *The Book of Hours*, and *The Book of Hours* is only early Rilke—Rilke before the Paris years and his profound encounter with the realism of Rodin. Nevertheless, it does at least point to a larger divergence. For one can hardly read both authors' prose, let alone their poetry, without being aware of important differences—not on the level of ideas, beliefs, intentions, but on a level prior to that—the level of individual sensibility. Levertov is as often vigorous, direct, "democratic" as Rilke is vulnerable, opaque, aristocratic. His *relentless* inwardness does not find its equivalent in her; any more than her relentless concern with our *historical* condition finds its equivalent in him.

In the end, however, it is not individual sensibility but aesthetic attitude and artistic understanding that lie at the heart of the Levertov-Rilke relationship. Whatever their personal tendencies, they are in agreement that the artist's vocation and the work of art as autonomous other utterly transcend all such subjective factors. This, of course, is what constitutes the core of what Levertov has called the "sense of aesthetic ethics" Rilke has helped her develop. His profound commitment to his work, his resolute sense of himself as essentially a vehicle of the power of poetry—this is what has led her to own him as

"mentor." Indeed, only when one weighs fully the degree to which Levertov's activist tendencies have steeped her in non-aesthetic concerns can one begin to appreciate fully the importance of Rilke's example. After decades of intense, demanding commitment to issues of peace and justice, hers is still first and foremost the voice of a poet—one of our best poets. For this we may, in part, thank Rilke.

NOTES

¹ Levertov has been kind enough to let me see her personally annotated copy of the *Selected Letters*.

² On two occasions Levertov approvingly cites Rilke's suggestion that while art "is not concerned at all with any effect . . . it may be that involuntarily [its creations] become somehow exemplary for every human activity by reason of their innate disinterestedness, freedom, and intensity" (*PW* 47–48, 113). In other words, the artist's "task" does not differ in *kind* from that of man *qua* man but only in its specific results.

³ And this, Levertov has repeatedly insisted, is also Williams's basic position. Attempts to interpret his "No ideas but in things" as a justification of "documentary realism" represent a gross misunderstanding of what he meant. See, for example, her essay "An Admonition" (*PW*).

⁴ By far the most important item in Levertov's personal index to Rilke's *Selected Letters* is the one entitled "acceptance of life, wonder." Its ten entries are more than double those of any other item.

⁵ Hallisey explores the Hasidic influence on Levertov's sense of calling.

⁶ Needless to say, the claim is not being made that Levertov learned the importance of precision solely from Rilke. Greater clarity of perception and language was a general result of her move to America. (She herself singles out Ezra Pound's influence as especially telling in this regard. See, for example, Sybil Estess 160.) However, it is important to emphasize that whatever lessons Levertov learned in America, they served not to *cancel* but to *reinforce* what she had already found in Rilke.

⁷ Just how important this idea of "Discovery and Revelation of Form" is to Levertov can be seen in her determination to insist upon it to Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, when she was still closely associated with both. During the summer of 1963, she proposed to Creeley that in his formulation "Form is never more than the extension of content," "extension" be replaced by "revelation" (*PW* 60).

Even more revealing is a disagreement she had with Duncan over the original "ground" from which poems arise. While Duncan championed a kind of absolute freedom, creation "out of nowhere," Levertov, her "deepest personal commitment [being] . . . to what I believed Rilke meant," continued to insist that poems arise from

having something (at heart) "to say," and so to a high valuation of "honesty." . . . [Duncan] saw a cluster, or alignment, that linked *convictions* with *preconceptions* and *honesty* with "ought," while the cluster I saw linked *convictions* with *integrity* and *honesty* with *precision*. (*LC* 208–09)

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In other words, Rilke's sense of "inner need" presupposes a "something" demanding articulation, and it is the existence of this demand that defines and justifies the crucial role played by honesty and precision in the creative process.

⁸ This is not the place to embark upon an extended discussion of the particulars of Levertov's aesthetics. However, lest there be any misconception, it is important to emphasize that the "deep mimesis" we are speaking of has no more to do with naive realism than Williams's insistence upon "ideas in things" has to do with one-dimensional documentation (see note 3). The poet's mimesis is primarily a mimesis of perception, and the precision it requires posits faithfulness not to objects but to one's experience of those objects. As Levertov says of Rilke,

To experience his writings is *comparable* to the experiencing of natural phenomena [emphasis added] . . . he had the gift of sharing with his readers not the apparently unmediated illusion of a sight, [an] event, an emotion but—a subtle difference—the *experience of its apperception*. (WSR vi)

Furthermore, such a sense of deep mimesis does not imply some kind of blind, mechanical transcription. Although some passages in Levertov seem to suggest a truly fine level of mimetic detail, she never fails to point out that the mimesis in question is ultimately not of the parts but of the whole. Hence the poet's "form sense" is called into play to make adjustments, to guarantee that the completed poem possesses its own organic logic and coherence:

When the written score precisely notates perceptions, a whole—an inscape or gestalt—begins to emerge; and the gifted writer is not so submerged in the parts that the sum goes unseen. The sum is objective—relatively, at least; it has presence, character, and—as it develops—needs. The parts of the poem are instinctively adjusted in some degree to serve the needs of the whole. (LC 68)

⁹ Given her strong socio-political interests, as well as the overtly ideological character of much contemporary verse, Levertov has also felt herself called upon to combat varieties of literary manipulation with which Rilke was not concerned. Thus, while staunchly defending the right of poets to include political material in their work, she draws a sharp distinction between political material that has been thoroughly absorbed into a poet's experience (and hence is as valid as other authentic material) and the deliberate use of poetry as a vehicle for political expression:

Good poets write bad political poems only if they let themselves write the deliberate, opinionated rhetoric, misusing their art as propaganda. The poet does not *use* poetry, but is at the service of poetry. To *use* it is to *misuse* it. A poet driven to speak to himself, to maintain a dialogue with himself, concerning politics, can expect to write as well upon that theme as upon any other. (PW 115)

She draws the same basic distinction in other areas; for example, "women's poetry" (see Zwicky 125).

¹⁰ See, for example, Rilke's comment that "the Man of the Spirit must needs be the opponent and controverter of all revolutions" (*Selected Letters* 288). However, it is characteristic of Levertov's deep sympathy with Rilke's spiritual

disposition that in the same letter she marks out his question: "Who then would not yearn for a great storm to tear down everything obstructive and decadent so as to make room again for the creative, infinitely youthful, infinitely benevolent powers?" Indeed, there is hardly a single progressive political statement in the *Selected Letters* that she did not register. The truly powerful anti-war outburst in Rilke's letter of October 10, 1915, is scored with a triple line.

¹¹ For another, in many ways parallel example of psychic resonance and anticipation, see Levertov's discussion of "Xochipilli" (*CEP*) in *The Poet in the World* (p. 73).

¹² Though the poet's outbursts may be "unpredictable" and "irregular," they are not unaccountable. As Rilke explains: "In him the forward thrust of our vessel and the force opposed to us were continually held in counterpoise—from time to time a surplus accumulated: then he sang" (*WST* 66).

¹³ Aitchity 8.

¹⁴ Perhaps a word of caution is in order. As Levertov herself has remarked on several occasions, at least one important reason why for her Rilke's prose has been much more influential than his poetry is her limited German (*LC* 283). Hence, in looking at Rilke's originals and her variations, we should be wary of making aesthetic comparisons. Given the limitations of Levertov's German, given the cultural differences between Rilke's Europe and Levertov's America, given the fact that Rilke's poems were written at the beginning of his career while Levertov's variations are the product of a poet at the height of her powers, there seems little point in trying to decide which version of a given theme is more or less compelling. Indeed, since *The Book of Hours* provides the models for all but one of the variations, there is the additional complication of fictive authorship—the poems in his volume being presented as the work of a monk.

¹⁵ One is, in fact, tempted to identify Rilke's presence in three of the four poems in the final section of *A Door in the Hive*. The description in "Ikön: The Harrowing of Hell" of Christ's flesh as "lit from within" reminds one of the "inwardly lit" "Torso of an Archaic Apollo," a Levertov favorite (see, e.g., *PW* 100), while the reference in "Dream 'Cello" to an "Invisible Hive" (presumably the source of the volume's title) cannot help recalling Rilke's famous "bees of the Invisible."

Interestingly enough, the only other place where Rilke assumes a structurally prominent role in a volume of Levertov's verse is in "Overland to the Islands," the first poem in the volume by that name. There his "every step an arrival" provides most of the poem's last line. To be sure, *Here and Now* may actually owe its title to a Rilke passage, the conclusion of the famous "Worker Letter": "'Give us teachers who will praise the Here and Now for us'" (*Selected Letters* 346). In Levertov's copy of the letters this passage is both marked and underlined.

¹⁶ In his discussion of this pair of poems Marten makes much the same point: "Levertov firmly places the spiritual in the physical" (177). For a reading of the three Rilke variations in *Breathing the Water*, see Marten 177–84. Marten's exploration of the way in which Levertov's variations modulate between the outer and the inner is especially interesting.

¹⁷ One is reminded of "Candles in Babylon," with its "midnight streets," "arsenals," and "torture castles with no windows" where

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we race by barefoot, holding tight
 our candles, trying to shield
 the shivering flames, crying
 'Sleepers Awake!' (CB ix)

¹⁸ So committed is Levertov to this idea that she even interprets Christ's passion along the same lines, i.e., as a redemptive act essentially defined by and dependent upon human actions in the here and now. See, for example, "Standoff" (BW 67). Note also how in "St. Thomas Didymus" (DH 101-03), the speaker expresses absolutely no shame at his need for senuous confirmation of Christ's resurrection:

what I felt was not
 scalding pain, shame for my
 obstinate need,
 but light, light streaming
 into me, over me.

Whether or not salvation is possible, it will only happen through this world.

¹⁹ Interesting in this regard is Rilke's sixth poem, which envisions God as a "neighbor," someone living only a "narrow wall" away. In Levertov's "The Task" (OP), the first stanza deliberately conjures up a similar image of God as "an old man/always upstairs, sitting about/in sleeveless undershirt"—only to reject it emphatically: "No, God's in the wilderness next door/ . . . /and hears far-off/our screams." There is, of course, no certainty that Levertov had in mind Rilke's poem, but the difference between his sense of proximity and her sense of distance would accord well with the distinction we have been exploring.

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Openmouthed in the Temple of Life: Denise Levertov and the Postmodern Lyric

KEITH S. NORRIS

In "Some Notes on Organic Form" (*PW* 7–13) Denise Levertov asserts the notion of a discoverable form, not proscribed but available to the poet willing to "explore." I want to assert not simply that such exploration is necessary and desirable for contemporary poets but that writing lyric poetries that explore what Levertov calls "resemblances" is crucial to both the survival and the political viability of the lyric poem in the contemporary world. In the post-nuclear age, when worldwide we are reminded of difference and of the inability to communicate beyond the general nastiness of self-assertion, drawing connections to a "form beyond forms" through an individually adaptable lyric makes poetry viable in two ways: first by creating a space where a poet can explore all options, on both the personal and social levels, in order to provide a means of political safe haven, and second by making connections that may help save us from the isolation and separateness that pervade our culture from the streets to the humanities tower, each "department" separated floor by floor.

Levertov redefines Gerald Manley Hopkins's *inscape* as "the pattern of essential characteristics both in single objects and (what is more interesting) in objects in a state of relation to each other," and of *instress* as "the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the appreciation of inscape" (*PW* 7). In Levertov's theory, the idea of instress allows the poet to watch herself perceive the essential character of the postmodern environment, an environment often associated with a lack of defining form. But it is this constant flux of the contemporary world that a

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postmodern lyric must reveal and address; Levertov calls this pursuit of conscious poetic evaluation a "fidelity to instress" (10). It is interesting that in her description of inscape, Levertov uses a psychological term, apperception, which she defines as "recognizing what we perceive" (7). Her identification of organic poetry as a "method of apperception" moves the Levertovian idea of organicism beyond the notion of a simple form/content synthesis or a discussion of inherent form to an active poetry, one that can both engage and critique the "postmodern" landscape, external and internal. The idea of fidelity to a process that consciously and continuously attempts to write the structure of a non-structured world celebrates the double bind in which any artist finds herself or himself this late in the twentieth century, rather than suffering under it as I would argue any "new" formalism does.

In his recent *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson posits a double role for the required multi-mindedness of the individual in the contemporary world:

The way in which what I have been calling schizophrenic disjunction or *écriture*, when it becomes generalized as a cultural style, ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content we associate with terms like schizophrenia and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older affects of anxiety and alienation. (29)

This brief passage from a book that effectively shows us how we live and how we respond to living "immersed in the immediate" (400) serves as a definition of a conventional "postmodernism" as it finds its way into poetry. Jameson is responding to the "schizophrenic" nature of language poetry in this context, more specifically to Bob Perelman's poem "China," but I think we can draw an interesting parallel to Levertov's poetic theory here. Language poetry is, in a sense, the extreme example of a connection with the disturbing multitude of images present in the contemporary world; Levertov asserts a poetry that not only can recognize and reproduce that miscellany with a "joyous intensity," but can also achieve a safe place from which to critique such a world. Levertov's poetics offer a way not only of playing the postmodern game but of identifying the postmodern in its historical sequence.

By the time of the Vietnam War, Levertov's poetic theory becomes inseparable from her ideas about the contemporary political scene. In *The Poet in the World* she notes that

A sense of history must involve a sense of the present, a vivid awareness of change, a response to crisis, a realization that what

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was appropriate in this or that situation in the past is inadequate to the demands of the present. . . . We are living our whole lives in a *state of emergency* which is—for reasons I'm sure I don't have to spell out for you by discussing nuclear and chemical weapons or ecological disasters and threats—unparalleled in all history. (115)

This is the need for a new lyric poetry, one that seeks connections organically while being mobile enough to deal with the postmodern environment. Levertov's "state of emergency" is as good as any starting point for a definition of the postmodern condition; her list of worries, the "demands of the present," marks what is present in almost anyone's definition, the multitude of directions in which the mind is forced to go when considering the larger issues of our culture.

Terry Eagleton's discussion of the Kantian aesthetic is helpful in viewing Levertov's organic lyric as an active creator of political space (as opposed to the purely romantic notion of wished-for space in a poem like Shelley's "Mont Blanc" or the pseudo-modern space of Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West"). Eagleton notes:

Aesthetic judgement is then a kind of pleasurable free-wheeling of our faculties, a kind of parody of conceptual understanding, non-referential pseudo-cognition which does not nail down the object to an identifiable thing. (85)

Eagleton's "non-referential pseudo-cognition" is evasive, yes, but I think evasiveness is precisely how Levertov's lyric, in its "fidelity to instress," allows for a materialistic critique of evasive postmodern society where, as Inger Christensen points out, the "horrors of war" have separated Levertov from a solely affirmative, religious view of organicism (114–15).

And so a "free-wheeling" organicism is what Levertov eventually adopts, a point of critique that changes with the situation. In her "instress" the subject position of the poet is as flexible as the object content of inscape. Neither subject nor object is constant but they organically change as the need for a new point of view arises. Levertov makes this point clear near the close of "Some Notes on Organic Form" as she recognizes that, while a poem should move immediately from one perception to another, "There must be a place in the poem for rifts too—(never to be stuffed with imported ore). Great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all" (PW 13). Here is where the organic lyric poem operates, as do many modern and postmodern narratives—in its ability to move quickly from one perception, or anecdotal narrative we might say, to

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another, all the while crossing great gaps of meaning, and coming to understanding in how we cross those gaps.

The postmodern lyric poet is fighting against reduction, reification to one point of view with narrative constancy—"fidelity to instress" correctly won't permit a single narrative totality if the poet is alive and "in the world." But, as the deconstructionists have noted, involvement in the postmodern world undermines our ability to assume an Archimedean point and critique it. The shifting, changing nature of the subject/speaker/poet in Levertov's organic poetry moves with the movement of perception and therefore maintains a consistent relationship to it. Levertov calls this the "truth," what she earlier calls "a form in all things," at the conclusion of "Some Notes on Organic Form":

The X factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps. A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side—that's ecstasy. (PW 13)

And so the truth isn't static here, but is the process itself; organicism isn't a form, but a constantly evolving formation. As the lyric poet moves from one anecdotal perception to another she creates narrative connections, which work as a strategy for survival; as Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious*, narrative can create a "local place" for political freedom, where the individual can return to a world that isn't "compartmentalized" (40). The postmodern lyric, in its organicism, has necessarily adopted a shifting narrative quality that moves with the poet's need to achieve instress.

In the "Prologue: An Interim" section of "Staying Alive" in *To Stay Alive* (1971), Levertov presents the reader with a multitude of voices intimately connected to the present, 1968. We begin in motion, "While the war drags on, always worse, / the soul dwindles sometimes to an ant / rapid upon a cracked surface" (21). This is conventional lyricism, beginning with a situation and noting the condition of the soul in response. But we move on to other voices: a narrator describing various scenes; what we can interpret as the poet responding to language itself; the punctuation of a continuing narrative about an eighteen-year-old fasting war protester; a three-year-old fragment written in Puerto Rico. The whole of these loosely connected fragments is called an "interim," where the poet can bring together the vast collection of perceptions she experiences in both time present and recent history and work toward an evaluation.

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In "Great Possessions," an essay originally given as a lecture in 1970, Levertov addresses the idea of writing politically viable poetry:

But for a poet the attention to things and people, to the passing moments filled to the brim with past, present, and future, to the Great Possessions that are our real life, is inseparable from attention to language and form. And he must recognize not only that poetry is intrinsically revolutionary but that it is so not by virtue of talking *about* any one subject rather than another (though if he has political concerns they may not be excluded, and *not* to have political concerns—in the broad and deep sense of the term—is surely impossible to the aware adult in the last quarter of the twentieth century). But whether content in any poem is huge or minuscule, funny or sad, angry or joyful, it can only be deeply and truly revolutionary, only *be* poetry, "*song that suffices our need*," by being *in its very substance of sound and vision* an ecstasy and a giving of life. (PW 106)

The poet isn't striving to write *about* any one thing, but is following the organic movement of the lyric itself; for a poet who is "an aware adult in the last quarter of the twentieth century," that movement includes a move into the realm of revolutionary politics. Some of "Prologue: An Interim" is overtly political as perception takes the poet in that direction, and the sum of the poem is certainly political as it strives toward a language that can still remain viable even as it is used to manipulate understanding, but it is also personally political as it temporarily allows the poet to view, to apperceive, the inscape of the postmodern situation at one point in 1968.

The second stanza of section i describes the soul of the speaker as it moves through its various perceptions: "lightly, grimly, incessantly/it skims the unfathomed clefts where despair/seethes hot and black" (TSA 21). This is the poet aware of instress, moving over the gaps she describes in "Some Notes on Organic Form," revealing her purpose to the reader. Levertov reveals connections to us in other, visual ways: the poem is divided into seven sections denoted by small roman numerals; any information about the fasting protester is given in italics; each section works as an independent unit, achieving its own particular movement and meaning. In section ii the first perception the "soul" skims leads the mind of the poet toward the larger inscape her writing is forced to deal with.

Children in the laundromat
waiting while their mothers fold sheets.
A five-year-old boy addresses
a four-year-old girl. 'When I say,

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Do you want some gum? say yes.'

'Yes . . . ' 'Wait!—Now:

Do you want some gum?'

'Yes!' 'Well yes means no,

so you can't have any.'

He chews. He pops a big, delicate bubble at her.

O language, virtue
of man, touchstone
worn down by what
gross friction . . .

And,

"It became necessary

to destroy the town to save it,"

A United States major said today.

He was talking about the decision

by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town

regardless of civilian casualties,

to rout the Vietcong.'

O language, mother of thought,
are you rejecting us as we reject you?

Language, coral island
accrued from human comprehensions,
human dreams,

you are eroded as war erodes us. (21–22)

The narrator/speaker's initial perception, of the simple manipulation of language by the young boy, leads her both to address language and, by addressing it directly, to deconstruct the relationship language has to the reality created by the boy's substitution of "no" for "yes." Language as a worn touchstone no longer capable of turning the raw material of words into exactly what is desirable is the result we see in the almost moral corruption of the young boy's speech. The cause, the "gross friction," responsible for this distortion follows with the same "yes for no" construction given by the major to explain the bombing of a Vietnamese village. We return to the speaker's voice in the next stanza as she asks if the connection her apperception has made is true. This is fidelity to instress: following the movement, making connections, allowing the speaker's, or the poet's, voice to intrude in what was moving toward narrative. The speaker answers herself in the affirmative; the connections are valid. The rest of "Prologue: An Interim" follows a course of showing us what we have to do to reclaim language.

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Section iii begins, "To repossess our souls . . ." (22), and we follow the development of the speaker's perceptions of her own history (what we suppose is the development of her own language use), the fasting war-resister, and current events both personal and political. We end up, six pages and vast amounts of perceiving later, at the crux of acting on the knowledge of the poem. What is prescribed is a movement which is the movement of organic poetry as Levertov has described it above. The final section reads:

To expand again, to plunge
our dryness into the unwearying source—

but not to forget.
Not to forget but to remember better.

We float in the blue day
darkly. We rest behind half-closed louvers,
the hot afternoon clouds up,
the palms hold still.

*'I have a medical problem that can be cured'—
Miss Squire said last week when she was removed
from the city workhouse to Cincinnati General
Hospital,*

*'I have a medical problem that can be cured
only by freedom.'* (28)

The assertion that by returning to the source we don't forget the burden of the past and of political experience is precisely what lyric poetry organically adapted to deal with the postmodern world can do for us.

The poem itself is what is left to us, is where we can go to combine the disparate elements of the surrounding culture. Ralph J. Mills has called Levertov's poetry the "poetry of the immediate . . . [which] signifies the complex relationship existing between the poet and the elements that are close at hand in her personal experience" (103-04). We've already seen this in the longer poem "Staying Alive," but this kind of cultural immediacy is also apparent in many of the shorter poems, where a similar personal political space is negotiated, or "mediated" as Jameson would have it (*Political Unconscious* 41-42). In "About Political Action in Which Each Individual Acts from the Heart," from *Candles in Babylon*, Levertov does exactly what the title indicates, shows us the connection between the individual and political action, thereby giving a political resonance both to solitary action and to actions of communion. The poem begins by placing us in a situation, giving us

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a specific *when*, a gesture that includes us in the ongoing action and places us in the act of perceiving. We begin when "solitaries draw close," when two individuals "give to each other the roses/of our communion—" (86). The speaker then proceeds to make a connection between the act of two coming together—there is no explicit lovemaking, but the metaphors work together to indicate an intimacy in a fairly confined realm, and political action in the larger world.

when we taste in small victories sometimes
the small, ephemeral yet joyful
harvest of our striving,

great power flows from us,
luminous, a promise. Yes! . . . Then

great energy flows from solitude,
and great power from communion. (86)

Organic form works here to bring two together on more than a physical level, to use the "communion" of the two to create a larger connection in the communally political realm. This is lyric revolution, as Julia Kristeva defines the term: "The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society" (17). The lyric instress creates both political viability and community. The movement of this short lyric, political action beginning with individual intimacy, and the poet discovering the connection through his or her apperception, finds expression in the postmodern lyrics of other contemporary poets as well—in Galway Kinnell's "The Waking," for example, where a couple are able to give change to beggars for breakfast because they have been in bed together.

Less overt in its connections, but perhaps more powerful in its evocation of emotional response to sexual intimacy, is "The Good Dream," from *Footprints* (1972). The poem begins with two lovers rediscovering each other "upon the big bed." This is the only narrative situation in the poem, a brief anecdote. The speaker then finishes the poem with an explication of the situation.

The joy was not in a narrow sense
erotic—not
narrow in any sense.
It was

that all impediments,
every barrier, of history,
of learn'd anxiety,

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wrong place and wrong time,

had gone down,
vanished.

It was the joy

of two rivers
meeting in depths of the sea. (31)

Levertov's organic instress is able to overcome history and present trouble in the most intimate of ways here. The poem is not static in its presentation of the lovers, but active in extending their actions to the world, and in bringing the world to their actions. The poem itself is what enables the speaker to overcome the burden of history and postmodern multiplicity—this is, in its most intimate setting, Levertov's organicism. "The Good Dream" reflects the most direct of Levertov's theoretical statements, from "An Admonition" written in 1970 in response to the manifesto of a little magazine:

We need a poetry not of *direct statement* but of *direct evocation*: a poetry of hieroglyphics, of embodiment, incarnation; in which the personages may be of myth or of Monday, no matter, if they are of the living imagination. (PW 61)

To Levertov the poet is constantly breathing in, "openmouthed in the temple of life" (PW 8), and while breathing in, is apperceiving the varying structures of those inspired perceptions, and how those structures varyingly connect and identify, at least for a moment, a larger form. In the poetry and in the postmodern environment of the "immediate" such fleeting connections may give us time to save ourselves, may give us opportunity to achieve a moment of political viability, may allow us the presence of mind to act humanely.

Svetlana Boym, in her conclusion to *Death in Quotation Marks*, after analyzing how our main modern critical impulse has been a kind of "necrophilia" that seeks both the literal and figurative death of the poet and of the poet's work, asserts that

We have to recover a certain kind of nontotalizable and antiauthoritarian ethics that helps to put together the making of poetry, love, and criticism, as well as the making and unmaking of the self. (248)

Perhaps in Levertov's theory we already have this kind of ethics, a fidelity to instress, to constant apperception—toward the end of an organic poetic understanding that creates a safe lyric space in which to write and a viable connection to those around us. In Levertov's theory we are individually responsible for pursuing the universal, not

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particularly responsible for the individuation of accepted universal truths. As we strive to understand the various violences that surround us at the beginnings of this decade, and to once again reclaim our language from its warmongering worst, the postmodern, post-nuclear lyric is one way we have of not surrendering to a simple transcribing of the babble of the postmodern world. Rather, we can transform that babble into a heteroglossic collection of mini-narratives—postmodern ecstasy.

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Evening Train: Preview and Excursus

RONALD R. JANSSEN

Just as this issue of *TLC* enters its final stages for publication, New Directions is releasing two new volumes by Denise Levertov: *New & Selected Essays* and *Evening Train* (thus "preview" in my title will not be accurate for many readers, but I retain it anyway because it better captures the spirit of what I'm doing here than would "review"). The first contains twenty-five essays, about half of which appeared in two earlier prose collections *The Poet in the World* and *Light Up the Cave*. In addition there are several essays on William Carlos Williams, others on the art of poetry, on poetry and its context, and, at the end, two essays on religious faith and a closing autobiographical sketch. This new collection would seem to be meant to replace the earlier two, since they are no longer included in the list of the author's works that stands at the front of both new volumes. (It is not clear, by the way, why the three collected volumes of poems up through 1972 have not similarly displaced the individual volumes which they contain.) The volume opens with an essay that amounts to a little anthology of poems with which Levertov experiences, as her title says, "Some Affinities of Content." That a number of the poets are from her newly adopted region, the Pacific Northwest, and that the book ends with essays on religion effects a kind of parallel between it and the new volume of poems, which begins and ends on the same subjects.

Evening Train, my real focus here, contains eighty-four poems arranged in eight sections. Major motifs in the volume include the poet's move to and assimilation of and into the landscape of a new region; age and change; public events; religion. In some respects the book stands as antiphony to her earlier volumes. It begins, for example, "I was welcomed here," as though in response to an earlier poem about travelers, "Knowing the Unknown" (*FD* 6), which poses the

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question "Shall we be welcome?" The new poem, "Settling" (ET 3), answers in the same terms as the question was originally asked—in terms of nature and a certain humility toward it. "Come into Animal Presence," another of Levertov's earlier poems beseeched us (P 23). One doesn't find many people who think of *us* in some functional relationship to the world (rather than the other way about), as Levertov does in "Tragic Error" (ET 69), where she offers some possible use for our miserable species; "to be those cells of earth's body that could/perceive and imagine, could bring the planet/into the haven it is to be known." This poem, too, with its emphasis on "our power,/willful or ignorant," answers to an earlier one, "Bus" (FD 4), where we read of "thickarmed men" and "their world/a world of will and function."

If the new book answers repeatedly to earlier ones—sometimes overtly, more often by allusion—this is in part because our times answer to earlier times; our right hands have *not*, despite the poet's wish in *Freeing of the Dust*, lost their cunning: by the Gulf War, the "smart bombs" of Vietnam days have been refined into "Immaterial weapons/no one could ever hold in their hands" (ET 76). We live in the most numbing of times: our leaders are bought and shameless liars, our press their craven lackies. Levertov's poems, as usual, forget neither these conditions nor that we ourselves permit them. Perhaps we need to tear our children from their video games (it is Levertov's, and probably the Pentagon's, notion that they are learning "new speeds of reflex" [ET 77] necessary for modern automated warfare) and introduce them to "the unfamiliar/while it is there—/sky, tree, bird" (ET 78).

These are the very images that open the new book: light, tree, eagle, along with mountain, snow, and restless sun. At the head of the first section stands the notation:

Lake Mountain Moon

(a scene à la Oriental minimalism, more a visual trigram, painting, or poem in itself than a title page for this opening section, since "Lake" figures almost not at all in the poems that follow). The dominant feature of the landscape is the mountain. Like a Cézanne or a Monet, Levertov has chosen her subject and pursues it through variations in rhythmic treatment, from the sonnet-like "Settling" to the notational "Morning Mist" or prosy run-on "Presence," the metamorphic "Effacement," the meditative "Open Secret." "Presence" is the operative word here: in one poem it is the "mountain's vast presence" (3); in another it's "the massive presence" (6); in another the "majestic presence" (7). At the same time, under the effects of atmospherics, the

mountain can lose its solidity and "become/one cloud among others,/ humble vapor,/barely discernible" (7). In metamorphic transformations it is, in one instance, like a "sea-wave" (4) and, in another, "moon-like" (14) in its rhythmic appearances and disappearances in recurrent banks of fog until even the mountain seems absorbed into the restless motions of these poems.

At times the poet is not content to let the mountain stand in its imagistic strength and flux and mystery, but rather feels an urge to spiritualize it; thus its invisible presence over the landscape is made to be "like the archangel walking/with Tobias on dusty roads" (7) and its absence the very image of divinity: "And we equate/God with these absences—/Deus absconditus" (5). To whom this "we" refers—a generation? a whole culture?—is not clear, except that the poet stands apart from it and offers an alternative:

But God

is imaged
as well or better
in the white stillness

resting everywhere (5)

(That visual presentation of "white stillness" in the white space on the page is reminiscent of a similar technique in "The Breathing"—

The fog
slowly flows
uphill.

White
cobwebs (80)

—where "white" is left to float in the very element it names.)

As befits its title, *Evening Train* is a book of motion and transition. The dominant rhythms are those of nature—

the restless sun
forever rising and setting (3)

the blue heron
rises from perfect stillness on wide wings (9)

Moon . . .
revealed as orb arising (12)

A gull far-off
rises and falls (13)

—but they also include the largely unexamined movement by which the poet came to this new locale, and, equally, if not more, interestingly,

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they include subtle motions of change and transition both in nature and in self, especially owing to age. The book begins in a moment of change—"of late summer, of opening autumn" (3)—and some of the best writing builds up to those moments: "That night/the moon was full; by morning/autumn had come" (11). The book has a special attraction toward "the gap,/the time between" (42), those moments when "not matter but process, process only,/gathers itself to appear/knowable: world, universe—" (105). The moon itself can be caught in moments of change:

this glow
 that begins to change
 from lambent red to a golden
 pervasive mist of light as the whole
 fullness of moon
 floats clear of the hill (12)

It's interesting that there is no direct glare of sun in these poems, but rather only sunlight in its morning or evening phases of somewhat "autumnal" coloration. At times correspondence is built between change in nature and change in self, as in "On the Eye": "We talked/of change in our lives. The moon/tuned its whiteness a tone higher" (43). The "evening train" of the book's title poem, of course, is the vehicle for all of this emphasis on motion, change, and transition: "Quite swiftly/we move through our lives; swiftly, steadily the train/rocks and bounces onward through sleeping fields" (63).

"Ancient Airs," the third section of *Evening Train*, offers reflections on the effects of age, on disrupting one's life, on the surprising resurgence of old feelings, but one of the most interesting elements in this section is the reflection it offers on the ways in which the self is riven. "Broken Pact," for example, is a meditation on the thesis, announced in the first line, that "a face ages quicker than a mind" (29). The self is thus divided between inner and outer, and the inner is further divided between mind and heart, which carry on a particularly active dialogical relationship: "they argue, they share epiphanies/sometimes all night they raise/antiphonal laments" (29). This dialogue is put into play in "Ancient Airs and Dances," where the poet's mind can berate the heart directly: "And now you clamor again/like an obstinate child demanding attention,/interrupting study and contemplation" (31).

The chief emotional experience here is self-betrayal, or betrayal of one part of the self by another part, of mind by heart—a mind that thought certain emotional reactions, particularly amorous ones, had

been taken under control, even that the new environment would provide moral instruction on self-control:

Did you not vow to learn
stillness from the heron,
quiet from the mists of fall,
and from the mountain—what was it?
Pride? Remoteness? (31)

The dramatic scene staged in such poems is not unprecedented, of course, either in English poetry (dialogues of body and soul, for instance) or in Levertov's own work. In fact, this fissuring of the central self is an interesting reminder that Levertov's poetry has frequently embodied certain kinds of division—self-doubts, insecurities, uncertainties—offered alongside, or within, overarching structures of certainty and control. "When I lose my center of gravity, I cannot fly," she has written in a late poem (*OP* 3), but that very centeredness is, at times, thrown into question.

"Talking to Oneself" from *Candles in Babylon* adduces in its very title the divided subject, and its matrix in ancient myth—Persephone/Demeter, Orpheus/Eurydice—is yet another means by which any idea of centered self is decentered, subject as it is to "treaties made/over your head" (9). "Talking to Oneself" is, then, a poem about what is often referred to as the "constituted" self. Myth is the mark of this condition, as it is in the "ancient holding patterns" of "Knowing the Unknown" in *Freeing of the Dust* (6) and "'every step an arrival'" in "Overland to the Islands" in the volume of the same name (*CEP* 55), all of them recalling Levi-Strauss's perception that myth writes people, not the other way about. How does one *choose* with such a pattern, when as "Talking to Oneself" says, "your road is ordained"? The sense of prefigurement is inscribed in the use of the future tense: "your steps *will* hurt you,/you *will* arrive/as usual" (my emphasis). Here this sense of the determined is meant to assuage "this April's pain," apparently the death of the mother. The pattern is inscribed in the mother, and in nature. It is remembering that one is a part of this pattern that is intended as consolation.

What place does "remembering" occupy alongside speech and writing? Here life is already written/spoken, as is marked, again, by the allusion to the two myths. The self here is not an originating center. Speech enters the present poem through etymology: "inexorable" with its root in "orare," to speak, and perhaps a false parallel in "ordained," which is rooted not in speech but in regulating and ordering. The poem

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turns on the inefficacy of present speech in the face of that which has already been spoken; the inefficacy of speech inscribed within a writing (the poem) which mimes speech in the form of counsel, which in turn implies a speaker, a message, and a receiver, all here internalized to divide the subject. She who knows and she who suffers are, as Eliot suggested, separated from one another. The exhortation to memory is, perhaps, an effort to heal the division, but, more likely, an exhortation to recognize it, to live within it as the constitutive division of one's life, one's condition.

In the new volume the nearest parallel to a larger sponsoring element is in the awareness given to the contexts, physical or otherwise, within which events transpire or we exist. In "River," for example, the poet must "brim my own banks, persist, / vanish at last in greater flood" (44), and in "The Almost-Island" the earth is seen "afloat in the wilderness we name / so casually, as if we knew it / or ever could know it, 'Space'" (101). The unruly self of "Broken Pact" or "Ancient Airs and Dances" is obeying stimuli less formal than myth and less encompassing than context, marking something of a contraction of vision in these poems. In "The Faithful Lover" the creative process is described as a "net or nest of perception" and its stages are specified: "seen then re-seen, recognized, wrought in myth" (21). Though the poems in *Evening Train* do not, in this early reading, seem brought to the fourth stage, the formulation, nevertheless, is one that future commentators will want to examine in the light of Levertov's poetry.

Evening Train contains examples of those things Levertov can do so well, such as involving the eye, ear, mind, and tongue of the reader in the re-creation of a scene:

Peak upon peak, brown, dustily gold, crowded,
sharp juttings, razorbacks, angular undulations,
so many we seem not to move above them, confusion
of multitudinous upthrust forms, pushing against
one another, surging. (37)

or the philosophical rendering of an ordinary experience, such as wearing an eyeshade:

Black silk, shelter me.
I need
more of the night before I open
eyes and heart
to illumination. I must still
grow in the dark like a root

not ready, not ready at all. (41)
 or, especially, the orchestration of harmonies:

... here—clear gold
 of late summer, of opening autumn,
 the dawn eagle sunning himself on the highest tree. (3)

Today the mountain
 is cloud,
 pale cone of shadow
 veiled by a paler scrim— (7)

that high shrilling like thin
 wires of spun silver, glint
 of wheeling flight—some small tribe
 leaving (11)

In "A Little Visit to Doves and Chickens" the poet remarks that "there's no moral nor irony/lurking among these words, no message" and feels relieved at the chance "to lean on the fence and simply look, and not feel/the need to press for a subtext" (22–23). Reading these words, I find myself in a quandary, wondering, on the one hand, if there is such a thing as a piece of writing without a subtext, and, on the other hand, what agency makes the poet feel compelled to write poems with morals and subtexts. Is the demand of audience, tradition, or self? Better, one thinks, to listen to "the old mother" in "Dream Instruction" who:

quotes to me what a woman
 born in slavery said, when she was free and ancient:
I sits here, in my rocker, evenin's,
and just
purely
be's. (60)

The f
works
FW
LB
EP
DH
DI
ET
F
FD
SP
HN
LF
LC
OI
OP
OTS
P
FW
PA
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WE
USR
The p
Corpo

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this issue to refer to Levertov's

works:

FW
B
EP
DH
M
ET
F
TD
OSP

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HN
LF
LC
ON
OP
OTS
P
PW
PA
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TE

TSR

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Reading India: E. M. Forster and the Politics of Interpretation

PAUL B. ARMSTRONG

When E. M. Forster is invoked by politically minded contemporary critics, it is usually to attack or dismiss him. His name has become a token for error or lamentable naiveté, whether he is presented as an illustration of the fallacies of liberal humanism, or as a last remnant of British imperialism, or as a practitioner of traditional narrative methods who lacks self-consciousness about the epistemological ambiguities of language.¹ This caricature of Forster is not only unfair; more seriously, it has prevented critics from appreciating the response his work offers to political issues of considerable contemporary relevance. My argument will be that this novelist's anguished but resolute defense of liberalism results from his recognition of the impossibility of reconciling different ways of seeing, a recognition he attempts to bring readers to share by his subtle play with narrative authority and point of view. Especially in *A Passage to India*, where the conflict of interpretations is portrayed as a conflict between cultures, Forster experiments with narrative techniques to educate the reader about what has come to be seen in contemporary theory as a central dilemma of political life: How can one commit oneself to the realization of particular values and beliefs while maintaining an ironic awareness of their contingency and contestability, their incommensurability with other equally plausible ways of thinking?

The place to begin in order to see not only why Forster is typically misunderstood but also how he might contribute to the contemporary debate about politics is Lionel Trilling's classic assessment of him as a representative of the liberal imagination. Trilling regards Forster as an exemplary figure for educating the liberal mind to a suspicion of ideals

and absolutes and to an appreciation of complexity and anomaly. But the language of Trilling's praise of Forster's "moral realism"—his awareness of "the contradictions, paradoxes, and dangers of living the moral life" given "the inextricable tangle of good and evil"—sounds helplessly old-fashioned (12). An invocation of moral categories like these, even in the hope of complicating them, may seem naive in light of the radical epistemological skepticism of much recent theory. A revelation of contradiction seems to many theorists more likely to expose the unreliability of a category than to demonstrate its accuracy as a register of "reality."

It is consequently not surprising, for example, that a theoretically sophisticated critic like Daniel O'Hara is impatient with the moderation of Trilling's Forster. O'Hara appreciates Trilling the "subversive patriarch" when he questions the prevailing ideas of his time, but in O'Hara's view opposition and subversion are unfortunately missing in Forster. According to O'Hara, Trilling finds in Forster "a normative vision of life as a classical drama of mature self-sacrifice and adjustment to reality" based on "the balanced development of the individual mind amidst the imperial anarchy of modernity" (81). In another climate of opinion this description of "moral realism" might be taken for praise (one thinks, for example, of Murray Krieger's celebration of "the classic vision"), but not when "balance" seems an illusion covering over the inevitability of undecidable interpretive disagreement. A similar suspicion of balance leads the postcolonial critic Benita Parry to dismiss *A Passage to India* as a symptom of "the crisis of liberal-humanist ideology—its impotence as a code in an embattled social situation where moderation and compromise are not possible" ("Politics" 32).² When difference and dissent seem epistemologically and politically inescapable, the quest of the liberal imagination for defensible ideals of justice and humanity, even when complicated by skeptical friends of liberalism like Trilling and Forster, seems deluded precisely because of its deliberate avoidance of extremes.

A more rigorous reading of Trilling's praise of Forster suggests that a dismissal of the novelist's social vision as naively moderate or logocentric is too hasty. Trilling finds in Forster a postmodern hermeneutic sensibility: "Forster refuses to be conclusive. No sooner does he come to a conclusion than he must unravel it again" (16). This deconstructive sense that the last word must always be displaced and deferred lest its promise of truth be believed leads, in Trilling's view, to "Forster's insistence on the double turn, on the something else that lies behind" which "is sometimes taken for 'tolerance,'" but "often makes

the severest judgments" and "does not spring so much from gentleness of heart as from respect for two facts co-existing" (17). According to Trilling, contradiction in Forster is not a harmonious balance of opposites but a double movement of asserting the possibility of making normative claims and calling them into question by doubting their definitiveness and univocity. The notion of contradiction in a "double turn" is not complexity refining a more accurate approximation of truth but rather the invocation coupled with the contestation of an interpretive or evaluative framework.

Exercising such double turns is the challenge of reading *A Passage to India*. A work of much greater epistemological complexity than its seemingly conventional narrative form suggests, this novel invokes the ideal of non-reified, reciprocal knowledge of other people and cultures only to suggest that interpretation invariably requires distancing, objectifying prejudgments. The novel insists that truth and justice can be determined unequivocally—Aziz is innocent, and India must be liberated from the yoke of British oppression—but its manipulation of point of view demonstrates the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of attaining a lasting consensus about any matter or of discovering a final, uncontestable meaning to any state of affairs. The result of these double movements is not paralysis but an appeal to the reader to act with an awareness, as Trilling puts it, that "much necessary action is anomalous" (14). Forster's great novel of India stages for the reader what it might mean to practice politics under erasure—to pursue ideals of justice and humanity with full faith in their claims to validity, even as one recognizes that any norms (including one's own) are perspectival constructs which cannot finally legitimate themselves.

Such a politics has much in common with Richard Rorty's notion of "liberal irony." According to Rorty, "liberal ironists" combine "commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment" (*Contingency* 61). They believe that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (xv), even though they recognize that this conviction, like all values, is culturally relative, contestable, and without absolute foundation. On both counts, Forster is an important, unrecognized precursor of Rorty, and *A Passage to India* attempts to stage for the reader the contradictions of liberal irony. Both Forster and Rorty desire a politics which would enable us to act with a sophisticated, skeptical awareness that all norms are provisional and contestable and that any consensus is potentially deceptive and hegemonic, but also with a defensible faith in ideals of justice and community as necessary guides for social change. After analyzing the narrative and epistemological double turns of *A Passage to*

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India, I will try to suggest Forster's affinities to a deliberately paradoxical "liberal irony" by imagining the position he would take in the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard over the politics of legitimation. Like Rorty, Forster would like to combine Lyotard's skepticism about the untranscendable heterogeneity of different perspectives with Habermas's affirmation of mutual understanding and uncoerced exchange as desirable ideals. Like Trilling, both Rorty and Forster believe that political action must be pragmatically contradictory and ironic about the ideals it pursues not because "balance" is the most "realistic" attitude but because "truth" is always deferred.

A Passage to India presents a clear, unequivocal image of its ideal of knowledge, but it does so negatively, in a way that questions it even while affirming it. The ideal is a respectful understanding of others which acknowledges their right to speak for themselves and which does not subordinate them to one's own interests and purposes.³ This is precisely the opposite of the treatment Aziz receives in his very first encounter with the British in the novel, when two ladies take his carriage and ignore his very existence: "The inevitable snub," Aziz thinks; they "turned instinctively away" upon seeing him and, when "he called courteously" to them, "did not reply, being full of their own affairs" (11-12). Appropriating his object while denying his status as a fellow human subject, they act as if he were invisible. When Indians are seen, they are often similarly ignored because a lack of recognition is implicit in Anglo-Indian claims of privileged knowledge of native behavior. "I know them as they really are," the police superintendent tells Fielding. "The psychology here is different" (160). He then promulgates psychological laws which justify his right to treat Indians as objects of his administrative power. As laws which claim to know others better than they know themselves, these readings deprive others of the right to comment on or to shape a description which will have power over them. Aziz identifies the link between knowledge and power when he calls the "pose of 'seeing India' . . . only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it" (296-97). Whether in the form of regarding others as beneath notice or of categorizing them according to preset ideas, knowing is an act of taking power over others if it is not a reciprocal recognition which respects each person's right to self-definition.

The novel invokes this ideal, however, only to violate it. As is well known, the novel unleashed storms of protest from members of the Anglo-Indian community that its portrait of them was prejudiced and

unfair (see Furbank 2: 126–30). At least two responses are possible to such criticism, and Forster made one of them: “If I saw more of Anglo-India at work . . . I should of course realize its difficulties and loyalties better and write about it from within. Well and good, but you forget the price to be paid: I should begin to write about Indians from without” (quoted in Furbank 2: 129–30). This response suggests that knowledge is inevitably exclusionary, one’s perspective necessarily setting one at odds with other standpoints. If such conflicts are unavoidable, however, then the ideal of mutual recognition between knower and known would seem doomed. Even if two parties overcome their opposition, their convergence only sets up differences between themselves and some other party. Because knowledge is necessarily perspectival, one can recognize another only by refusing recognition to someone else. Attaining mutuality thus means displacing rather than transcending difference.

Another response to the change of partiality is that, although prejudices are inescapable, they are not always wrong. Rustom Bharucha asks on Forster’s behalf: “Does the fact that he ‘loathes’ the Anglo-Indians imply that he doesn’t know them? I think not, but then I speak as an Indian. Turton [the chief administrator in *Passage*] is not a one-dimensional caricature for me: he represents a particular combination of pomposity and power that was known to exist in colonial India” (163). Acknowledging that he and Forster share a perspective others might contest, Bharucha defends not only the inevitability but also the potential productivity of distinctly partial, even partisan portraits. To call an interpretation one-sided is not necessarily to dismiss its validity if total, unrestricted knowledge is impossible. The beauty of this argument is that it turns the interpretive power of prejudice against the practitioners of it, but the resulting embarrassment is that one thus consents to the necessity of injustice and exclusion as the conditions for knowledge even though the lack of a respectful, reciprocal understanding of others is the crime against which one protests.

The Indian reception of the novel has also been controversial in ways which suggest that alienating acts of categorization and objectification may necessarily inhabit even a sympathetic reconstruction of the Other’s world. One Indian reader praises the novel because “for the first time I saw myself reflected in the mind of an English author, without losing all semblance of a human face” (quoted in Introduction to *Passage* xxiii). This reader recognizes himself in the mirror Forster holds up to India because the novelist represents his face (although seen, as a “face,” from the outside) as a “human” one and not as a mere

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object of curiosity or instrument for manipulation.⁴ Lacking any sense of this respect for the integrity of the Other, however, Sara Suleri charges Forster with practicing "representation as a mode of recolonization" and finds in his novel "the subterranean desire to replay, in twentieth-century narrative, the increasingly distant history of nineteenth-century domination" (169).⁵ The narrator's interpretive practice sometimes lends support to this charge because of his use of objectifying categories. Sounding much like the police superintendent promulgating psychological laws, the narrator claims at one point that "Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumour, a mental malady, that makes him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way a Westerner cannot comprehend" (267). Is such a judgment a legitimate attempt to make unfamiliar behavior comprehensible to a reader from another culture by employing familiar, recognizable metaphors ("suspicion" figured as a "tumour" or "malady"), or does it turn the Other into an exotic exhibit for what the narrator elsewhere dismisses as disrespectful, manipulative speculations about "Oriental Pathology" (208)? It can be read both ways, and its ambiguity suggests that interpretive types are both a source of demeaning prejudice and a vehicle of empathetic understanding.

The conflicts marking the reception of *A Passage to India* suggest that the novel offers a strategically ambiguous positive response to Edward Said's question: "How can one study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective?" (24). A liberating, non-instrumental understanding of others coincides with the ideal of a non-reified knowledge based on mutual recognition which the novel endorses and, for some readers, achieves. But the objections of other readers, both British and Indian, to the way the novel knows them reveal important hidden contradictions in Said's question. If knowledge is always from a "perspective," it cannot be "non-repressive and non-manipulative" precisely because its very partiality is necessarily objectifying and exclusionary. The attempt to recognize others as they themselves are to themselves must occur through an interpretive framework which distances and reduces them because, as a perspective, it is not identical with what it seeks to know. These epistemological dilemmas not only mark the history of *A Passage to India's* reception but also are central themes in the work itself. In its portrayal of how both the British and the Indian communities know, the novel casts doubt on the very ideal of a non-reifying understanding based on mutual recognition which it also urgently advocates and seeks to realize.

Forster's "double turn" in affirming and contesting the possibility of non-reifying knowledge can be seen in the novel's contradictory treatment of Anglo-Indian claims to interpretive authority derived from "experience." Much is made of the irony that appeals like the Collector's to his "twenty-five years' experience of this country" as entitling him to speak with "the whole weight of . . . authority" (155) result in disastrous misreadings. When Ronny Heaslop tells his mother about what his experience as an administrator has taught him, Mrs. Moore "felt, quite illogically, that this was not the last word on India" (44)—as, indeed, it is not. But when she and Adela Quested seek to discover "the *real* India" (19), they make repeated and equally disastrous mistakes in reading which demonstrate their lack of experience—their ignorance of conventions necessary for construing potentially misleading signs. Two of these misreadings are the direct cause of the ill-fated visit to the Marabar Caves—first when the newcomers accept a Hindu family's invitation which was probably not seriously meant and was not in any case carried out, and then when they mistake the meaning of Aziz's attempt to make up for this slight by a polite gesture and take seriously his invitation to visit his home: "He thought . . . of his bungalow with horror. Good heavens, the stupid girl had taken him at his word! What was he to do?" (67). And in a desperate inspiration he invites them to the Caves, where further misreadings will result in his imprisonment on an unfounded charge of rape. If the Collector's erroneous interpretation based on his experience wrongfully convinces him of Aziz's guilt, the irony is that the two newcomers' misinterpretations based on their inexperience pave the way for his mistake.

The point of this "double turn" is that non-reifying knowledge cannot be attained simply by discarding all preconceptions because without a prior understanding of the matter at hand one is not likely to make sense of it. What Adela and Mrs. Moore do not understand is that Indians do not always mean what they say—a discrepancy not unique to either East or West but a difference characteristic of the doubleness and hence the possible duplicity of signs. The narrator (presumably speaking from experience) claims of Indians: "What they said and what they felt were (except in the case of affection) seldom the same" (103). Because a coincidence of what is said and what is meant cannot necessarily be assumed (the mistake of the naive newcomers), an initiation into the conventions being employed and experience deciphering similar messages are requisite for reliable interpretation. Although experience can be a source of misleading prejudices, an

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anticipatory understanding of the probable meanings of the signs to be deciphered is necessary because their significance is not immanent within them. *A Passage to India* calls attention to this dilemma by both denying and affirming the importance of preceptions for interpretation.

Forster suggests the ubiquity of the obstacles to the ideal of knowledge he seeks by portraying the Indians as guilty of the same acts of misreading which he finds among the British, and for the same epistemological reasons. After the novel accuses the British of misconstruing Indian signs, it then shows the Indians committing the same mistakes not only toward the English but also among themselves. When the Collector issues invitations to the bridge party, for example, "his action caused much excitement and was discussed in several worlds" (30)—setting off a series of conflicting interpretations as to what lies behind it. Is he acting on orders from above, or is the invitation a genuine gesture of friendship? No one assumes that the meaning of the invitation is simply what it says, but no agreement is reached as to what the inscrutable Anglo-Indian is up to, and no one comes close to deciphering his actual motive.

If Anglo-Indian officialdom is blinded by its preconceptions about the Indians even as it cannot do without them, so its misunderstandings are duplicated by the prejudices of the Hindus and the Moslems about each other. The novel's primary victim of Anglo-Indian prejudice, the Moslem Aziz is full of his own prejudgments about his Hindu countrymen. As he tells Miss Quested and Mrs. Moore in explaining why the Hindu family's invitation fell through:

"Slack Hindus—they have no idea of society; I know them very well because of a doctor at the hospital. Such a slack unpunctual fellow! It is as well you did not go to their house, for it would give you the wrong idea of India. Nothing sanitary. I think for my own part they grew ashamed of their house and that is why they did not send." (62)

The irony here, of course, is that Aziz's own embarrassment about his "detestable shanty" (63) subsequently leads him to withdraw his suggestion that they call on him at home, and this irony in turn calls into question his prejudices about Hindus and his insistence on their radical difference from himself. His misunderstandings and conflicts with his subordinate, the Hindu Dr. Panna Lal, duplicate Aziz's own relation of mutual cultural opacity with his Anglo-Indian boss (who similarly thinks Aziz "slack" and "unpunctual"). Aziz reads the Hindus through his preconceptions about them, just as the Hindus do the Moslems ("I wish

they did not remind me of cow-dung," Aziz thinks of a Hindu interlocutor, who in turn thinks of him, "Some Moslems are very violent" [256]), and as the Anglo-Indians do to both, and as the Indians do to the British. Some preconceptions may be more just and more illuminating than others, and the powers of some prejudices over their objects may be more oppressive than others, but *A Passage to India* displaces the ideal of non-reifying knowledge through mutual recognition along a seemingly endless series of prejudices which include everyone.

Is the reader of *A Passage to India* simply to abandon the ideal that Forster calls up but then so powerfully criticizes and contests? Turning once again, Forster suggests that we can get beyond prejudice, but only by going through it—that is, by employing interpretive frameworks ironically, through a constructive act of negation which deploys epistemological categories and simultaneously suspects them. He repeatedly calls on the reader to undertake such a double movement in discounting the various interpretive constructs proposed in the novel and filling out what they do not include. The double movements begin with the very first paragraph of the novel, which describes the setting by negating the categories it invokes: "Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents *nothing* extraordinary. . . . There are *no* bathing steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens *not* to be holy here; indeed there is *no* river front, and bazaars *shut out* the wide and shifting panorama of the stream" (2, emphasis added; see also Beer 46–47). Projecting what is the case by discounting what is not is also the way the reader needs to respond to the various constructions of race, gender, and culture in the novel—such as, for example, the Anglo-Indian interpretation of Adela Quested as "the English girl who had had the terrible experience, and for whom too much could not be done" (202), "an English girl fresh from England" (156), "our sister" (171), "my own darling girl" (171). There are many reasons for suspecting these categories as having more to do with Anglo-Indian sexual and racial stereotypes and mechanisms of cultural self-definition than with Adela's confusion, anguish, and pain, but for many chapters (16–21) they and prejudices like them are all the reader is offered while Adela is kept as inaccessible from us as she is from Fielding, who feels that a few words with her would clear everything up. Such directness and immediacy are unavailable, however, and the reader is left to imagine what happened to Adela and what she is feeling by negating the images through which the British "Club" depicts her.

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Different categories require different kinds of negation. Some prejudices the reader must demystify and discard, like the construct of British purity under threat from a sexually dangerous racial Other implied by "the English girl." This construct reveals less about Adela than about how Anglo-Indian cultural identity is constructed by exclusion and projection. But even here something might be retained after the prejudice is discounted, if only because how Adela understands what occurred is shaped for her by the way the Anglo-Indian community receives her story. Other prejudices are more ambiguous, however, and require more subtle acts of negation coupled with recuperative appreciation. A contradictory combination of rejection and acceptance is necessary, for example, whenever the narrator invokes cultural types in his role as tour guide to India: "Religion is a living force to the Hindus, and can at certain moments fling down everything that is petty and temporary in their natures" (294). Without at least partially accepting categorical statements like this, the non-Indian reader can know nothing of the complexities of Indian life—but the novel's depiction of the will-to-power implicit in the tourist's desire to know the "real India" should make the reader suspect even benevolent generalizations, and such a response is appropriate because of the inevitable absences and exclusions which accompany any perspective.

Consistent with its implication that an ideal state of knowledge can be approached but only indirectly, through negation, *A Passage to India* affirms both the discoverability of "truth" and the necessity of endless interpretation. This is the epistemological paradox suggested by Forster's treatment of what happened in the Marabar Caves. On the one hand, Adela Quested's accusation against Aziz is unambiguously wrong. The reader is with Aziz in another cave at the moment the assault is said to have occurred, and we then see him discovering on the ground Adela's field-glasses with the broken strap which is later taken as evidence of their struggle. From the moment Aziz is arrested, the reader knows he is innocent—the "truth" of the matter is clear. On the other hand, we are never certain what really did happen to Adela in the cave or how the strap on her glasses broke—and Forster himself claimed not to know: "In the cave it is *either* a man, *or* the supernatural, *or* an illusion. And even if I know! My writing mind therefore is a blur here—i.e., I will it to remain a blur, and to be uncertain, as I am of many facts in daily life" (quoted in Furbank 2: 125). The echo she hears can be deciphered in any number of ways, and has been by readers of the novel (although it leaves her when she tells the truth and exonerates

Aziz). The field-glasses were physically present at the scene and, like a bullet hole, are an index bearing a trace of the event. Something happened, they tell us, but they are only a sign which must be deciphered to fill in the absent occurrence they point to, and they are subject to different interpretations, none of which ever reveal what happened. Executing yet another epistemological double turn, Forster rejects a radical skepticism about the existence of reality even as he portrays the elusiveness of a definitive interpretation.⁶

A similar doubleness is evident in his handling of point of view, through which he both affirms and questions the possibility of knowing other minds and of discovering a lasting consensus across different communities. The narrator moves freely among the minds of different characters with apparent faith in their intersubjective accessibility, but the effect for the reader is to stress the mutual opacity of worlds which only we and the narrator seem able to connect. Just before Adela's anguishing experience in the cave, for example, the narrator first shares with us the very intimate thoughts leading up to her question "Have you one wife or more than one?" (144) and then reveals to us Aziz's shocked response which he attempts to disguise: "To ask an educated Indian Moslem how many wives he has—appalling, hideous!" (144). Only the reader and the narrator ever know both sides of this cultural and personal misunderstanding which precipitates the major crisis in the novel. Our ability to explain the misunderstanding and to move back and forth between these two characters' tragically disjointed perspectives affirms the possibility of overcoming the mutual opacity of different worlds. But this is a privilege which should make the reader uncomfortable because our inability to share what we see with the characters duplicates the gap between worlds which has such awful consequences in the novel.⁷

This gap is dramatized again in a series of clues which we understand differently from the interpretations offered by a character—the picture of Aziz's beloved wife which is assumed by the police superintendent to demonstrate the accused rapist's lust, the displaced collar seen by Anglo-Indians as proof of native sloppiness after Aziz generously lends his collar pin to Fielding, or the reference of a British officer to an anonymous Indian polo player (whom we know to be Aziz) as an example of a native who is "all right" (175) in contrast to Adela's assailant.⁸ In all these instances the reader connects worlds which are opaque to each other by correcting misinterpretations which divide them. In line with Forster's faith in the discoverability of truth, the reader's ability to set these mistakes right suggests that we can cross the

boundaries dividing different perspectives. But intersubjectivity is thus affirmed through depictions of its absence which contest it by demonstrating the stubborn resistance of different perspectives to reconciliation.

The moral and political norm implied by intersubjectivity is an ideal of justice based on consensus. This ideal is resolutely endorsed by the novel's depiction of Fielding's exemplary courage, compassion, and commitment to truth in allying himself with Aziz and his Indian friends against the prejudices of British authority. But just at the moment of Aziz's triumphant vindication, Forster questions the possibility of justice and consensus by splitting Fielding off from the celebrating Indian party (putting him in a carriage with Adela)—thus beginning his increasing alienation from Aziz over the issue of the compensation Miss Quested should pay. Fielding's pleas for mercy—"Do treat her considerately," he begs. "She really mustn't get the worst of both worlds" (240)—do not further the cause of reconciliation but instead breed dissension and mutual recrimination. The narrator reports of Fielding that Aziz's "insensitiveness about Adela displeased him. It would, from every point of view, be right to treat her generously" (249). The irony, however, is that Fielding is equally open to the charge of insensitivity—of myopically universalizing his own perspective on justice and failing to credit other reasonable views. After unequivocally affirming the possibility of finding a legitimate agreement about truth and right at Aziz's trial, Forster throws open the question of justice and consensus again in the debate about compensation which ultimately drives Fielding and Aziz apart, even after Aziz yields and agrees to let Adela off.

Aziz for his part is unjust to Fielding in assuming that he had pecuniary motives in arguing against compensation, and Forster affirms the discoverability of a legitimate interpretation by disabusing Aziz and the reader of the assumption that Fielding wanted Adela to keep her money so that he could marry her for it. But before Forster allows the narrative to clear up this misconception, the reader is kept inside Aziz's mistaken perspective for an extended period (see 282–92). We may wonder how Fielding could be guilty of such infamy—but he is as opaque to us as he is to Aziz until the error is accidentally exposed when Aziz mistakenly calls Fielding's brother-in-law "Mr. Quested" (292) and finds he is actually Ralph Moore. If we have such doubts, they alienate us from Aziz's perspective even as we inhabit it and thus disturbingly re-create in our relation to him the dissonance between his world and Fielding's. Although truth finally prevails, Forster manipulates point of

view to give the reader a subtle but revealing experience of how the opacity of others can lead to conflicts about justice, and that memory lingers for the reader even as it does for Aziz and Fielding, who never regain their former intimacy after suspicion has divided them.

The difficulties of discovering and sustaining agreement between different perspectives are not solely a sign of the unbridgeable divide between British and Indian cultures but are also characteristic of India itself. The untranscendable diversity of India is a repeated refrain in the novel: "No one is India" (65), "Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing" (136), "There is no such person in existence as the general Indian" (255). Forster's depiction of India as a multifarious country which defies totalization is not an attempt to render it exotic and mysterious. Rather, the heterogeneity of India is a particular instance of a tendency toward internal diversity which can be found in many (perhaps all) cultures (see Clifford). Such a generalizing intention is evident when the narrator lists those not invited to the Collector's bridge party:

And there were circles even beyond these—people who wore nothing but a loincloth, people who wore not even that, and spent their lives in knocking two sticks together before a scarlet doll—humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it all. . . . We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing. (32)

The endless series of differences suggested here is in part attributable to class (the description of poverty), in part to culture (if the choice of loincloth or nakedness is dictated by custom rather than scarcity), in part to religion (the worshipers of the idol). The challenge to the "educated vision" is to "embrace" more than the Collector's party does. This appeal is not limited to India because differences of class, custom, and religion are not unique to it. Nor is the question with which the passage ends: Must something be excluded from any act of unification lest identity be abolished when differences are overcome? In raising this question Forster suggests not only that an all-encompassing consensus may not be possible but also, and perhaps more distressingly, that community may not be desirable if it requires negation and rejection.

When synthesis does occur in *A Passage to India*, it is often dangerous because of the exclusionary mechanisms which sustain it. The solidarity which the British community feels when it rallies to Adela's side is a state of communal solipsism based on scapegoating Aziz and banding together against the threat of a racially and sexually

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constructed Other. Fielding begins to become uncomfortable with his Indian allies when their solidarity in a just cause seems to become similarly vindictive and blinding: "Victory, which would have made the English sanctimonious, made them aggressive. They wanted to develop an offensive, and tried to do so by discovering new grievances and wrongs, many of which had no existence" (248). One of Fielding's reasons for asking for mercy for Adela is to prevent her from becoming the scapegoat to the Indian community which Aziz had been to the British. In order to act in concert against British oppression, the Indians need to overcome their differences, and such solidarity is facilitated by a sense of shared injustices and by the mediation of myths and symbols whose unifying force is unrelated to their basis in reality (hence the power of the absurd chant "Esmiss Esmoor, Esmiss Esmoor . . ." [214]). But Forster worries that the mechanisms of exclusion and projection which bring about such unity may themselves mirror the unjust practices they seek to eradicate. Once again employing the particular circumstances of India to suggest a more general political problem, Forster asks whether the uses of consensus in the pursuit of justice can be protected from the abuses of a communal solipsism which practices violence on others by inventing exclusionary fictions about them.

Invoking and questioning the ideal of community to the end, the novel concludes by sounding the notes of concord and discord simultaneously.⁹ In the Hindu festival which dominates the last section of the novel, all conflicts are transcended: "The festival flowed on, wild and sincere, and all men loved each other, and avoided by instinct whatever could cause inconvenience or pain" (294). But this image of achieved reconciliation is contested by the Moslem Aziz's detached, often uncomprehending perspective: "Aziz could not understand this, any more than the average Christian could," and he "felt bored, slightly cynical" because "these sanctities . . . had no connection with his own" (295, 296). Analogously, Aziz and Fielding overcome their differences only to rearticulate them in their final conversation—rediscovering trust and intimacy even as they quarrel about Indian politics, a conflict which thwarts the declaration of friendship both seek. Whenever Forster invokes an ideal of community or mutual recognition, he questions it by asserting cultural or personal differences of perspective. The consequence, even to the end, is to invoke the ideal negatively, by deferring it: "No, not yet" and "No, not there" (312). The reasons for deferring a vision of synthesis are not only practical, having to do with the particular political problems of India, but also epistemological, a

consequence of the irreducibility of different perspectives and the obstacle they present to univocal notions of justice and consensus.

Forster's "double turns" in *A Passage to India* imply that the quest for legitimate norms of truth and justice is more complicated and contradictory than either Habermas or Lyotard suggests in their debate about the politics of interpretation. The epistemological and social ideal invoked by Forster's novel has much in common with Habermas's goal of "uncoerced consensus arrived at among free and equal persons"—"a constraint-free intersubjectivity of mutual understanding . . . a sphere of agreement free of violence" (*Modernity* 40, 220). As much as Forster shares this ideal, he is also suspicious of it. The depiction in *A Passage to India* of the untranscendable heterogeneity of the social world gives support to Lyotard's objection that "Habermas's consensus reached through discussion . . . does violence to the heterogeneity of language-games": "The stress must be placed on dissensus. Consensus is a horizon which will never be attained" (16, 175). Forster would agree with Lyotard that consensus itself may be oppressive if it suppresses the differences which give perspectives their identities. Non-coercive mutual understanding may result not in agreement or the discovery of common convictions but in an acknowledgment of the irreducibility and opacity of other worlds—or so Aziz and Fielding find when their quest for union at the end reveals the deep, abiding differences between them.

Rorty's "liberal irony" is similarly contradictory on this score. On the one hand, Rorty recommends that "when we look for regulative ideals, we stick to freedom and forget about truth and rationality. . . . Whatever else truth may be, it is something we are more likely to get as a result of free and open encounter than anything else" ("Truth" 634). In his analysis of the Habermas-Lyotard debate he consequently supports Habermas's advocacy of uncoerced communication: "Social purposes are served, just as Habermas says, by finding beautiful ways of harmonizing interests, rather than sublime ways of detaching oneself from others' interests" ("Postmodernity" 174). On the other hand, Rorty—like Forster—doubts that universal agreement can be discovered: "To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. . . . Everyone is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate" ("Solidarity" 13). For that reason Rorty accepts Lyotard's claim that different narratives for explaining the world (Rorty calls them "vocabularies") cannot necessarily be synthesized and that this heterogeneity is not a bad thing.

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Turning yet again, however, Rorty criticizes Lyotard for assuming "that the intellectual has a mission to be avant-garde, to escape the rules and practices and institutions which have been transmitted to him in favor of something which will make possible—'authentic criticism'" ("Postmodernity" 174). Consensus may not deliver truth, but the various forms of social discourse still have uses and should not simply be discarded. By the same token Forster continues to employ narrative forms which assume community with his reader even as he uses them to give us a sense of the unbridgeable differences dividing us.

A Passage to India also criticizes the ideal of consensus on grounds Rorty does not suggest. The British Club's misreading of Aziz's guilt shows that freely given mutual agreement may be a blinding communal solipsism rather than a collective revelation of truth. Forster's skepticism about the exclusionary mechanisms through which social solidification is often achieved suggests that consensus may be not only irrational but also violent and oppressive. If all "gatherings" achieve their identity by virtue of those they "exclude," the uncoerced unification of one community may result in the forceful and repressive rejection of others.

The dangers of communal solipsism and exclusionary violence make Forster return again to an advocacy of reciprocal, non-manipulative knowledge even after he has criticized it. Lyotard's endorsement of "dissensus"—of innovative counter-moves which break the rules and create new games—portrays knowledge as inherently conflictual, an agon between perspectives from which one can liberate oneself only by an act of subversion which then itself becomes a new participant in the combat (see 40, 59). Forster's novel suggests, however, that there is often a human cost when perspectives conflict, whether the disappointment and confusion of a failed attempt to reach understanding with another (again the example of Aziz and Fielding comes to mind), or the loss of liberty and integrity one may suffer if one's perspective is denied (the novel's indictment of the epistemological will-to-power of imperialism). Lyotard is aware of these dangers, and they lead him to appeal for "an idea and a practice of justice, which is not bound to the notion of consensus"—a sense of mutual respect, for example, which would condemn "terror," the "elimination or threat of elimination of a player from the language-game" (190). This notion of justice rejects the ideal of unity implicit in consensus, but it acknowledges the importance of mutual recognition and non-coercive acceptance of differing perspectives. In a Forsterian double turn, the ideal of community as a principle of justice is thus both rejected and

affirmed—negated as an impossible and perhaps dangerous dream of unity, but recuperated and embraced as an enabling condition of reciprocal recognition without which language and other games based on an exchange of differences could not long function.

My construction of Forster's position in the Habermas-Lyotard debate suggests, then, at least a negative answer to the question of legitimization. Although it may not be possible to discover norms of truth and justice which can claim validity across different perspectives, Forster and Lyotard agree that some acts can be judged illegitimate. "Terror," as Lyotard defines it, is wrong, even if this negative judgment cannot be translated into converse form—that is, it does not dictate unequivocally what is right. This contradiction reproduces Forster's double movement in affirming and contesting a univocal standard of justice. *A Passage to India* suggests that the ideal of non-reifying knowledge based on reciprocal recognition can legitimately and unambiguously condemn some epistemological and political practices. The novel never wavers in its rejection of manipulative, repressive Anglo-Indian prejudice and the exclusionary violence it perpetrates. But the ability to render such a negative judgment does not always allow us to decide whose version of justice is correct. Hence Forster's reintroduction of a dispute about justice (should Adela pay compensation?) after vindicating the innocent Aziz, and hence his portrayal of the unsynthesizable heterogeneity of India which the momentary consensus about Aziz cannot overcome.

The possibility of making negative judgments is not enough, however. Here Forster agrees with Habermas that positive norms are necessary to provide goals for social change. One positive imperative in Forster's condemnation of the refusal to recognize the integrity of differing perspectives is a call to work for conditions which allow free, equal exchange—the sort of uncoerced conversation that Rorty advocates as a substitute for the impossible dream of "truth" and "reason." Like other pragmatists, Forster finds such conditions in democracy: "So two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only Love the Beloved Republic deserves that" (*Democracy* 67). Since we cannot have a world of all-embracing harmony which would deserve three cheers, let us encourage multiplicity and disagreement. These might seem obstacles to community, but because a synthesis of perspectives is impossible, allowing their differences free expression is the best alternative. With Rorty, Forster advocates uncoerced exchange not because such

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"communicative rationality," to borrow Habermas's term (*Reason* 10), will result in agreement (as Habermas hopes) but precisely because it won't. Forster's endorsement of democracy is modest and negative, based on skepticism about consensus and unity, but it nonetheless projects a positive image of social relations which people with different perspectives can join together to pursue. Forster is suspicious of declarations of faith: "I do not believe in Belief" (*Democracy* 65). But he also suggests that it is possible, indeed necessary, to believe in ideals after one has criticized them. The "double turns" which define the experience of reading *A Passage to India* endorse a paradoxical but pragmatic course of pursuing goals which are impossible to justify or attain. Mutual understanding may be an illusion because of the irreducible opacity of other perspectives, but it cannot be approached unless one believes in it. A non-reifying knowledge of others may always elude us because of the necessary role of preconceptions and categories in understanding, but again we forfeit any chance of realizing this ideal even partially and imperfectly if we refuse to commit ourselves to it. A consensus about truth and justice may not be possible, but different perspectives have the right to pursue their own particular visions because no view can claim in advance special inherent privileges over the others. Forster is a pragmatic ironist who suggests that we need to believe in ideals which we know we cannot justify because, if we did not, they would lose all meaning and force and we would be left with nothing. Reading *A Passage to India* is an education in the double movements necessary to sustain the contradictory attitude of suspecting ideals one believes in and believing ideals one suspects.

NOTES

¹ For examples of these charges see (in order) Parry, "Politics"; Suleri; and Schleifer 54-55. I will evaluate their claims in more detail during the course of my argument.

² For a similar argument see Jameson's attack on Forster as a typical example of the political mystifications of modernism (12-22).

³ This is an ideal shared by many contemporary critics of colonialism and imperialism. For a useful survey of their views, see Parry, "Problems." For especially insightful analyses of the epistemological and political problems of cross-cultural understanding, see Clifford, Said, and Spivak. Also see my essay "Play." Khare calls this ideal "genuinely reciprocal representations": "The issue now is not simply to represent the Other but to recognize it anew, with its own powers of recognition, representation, and persuasion intact" (1-2). Or, as Tomlinson argues, the decisive question about cultural imperialism is "Who speaks?" (98).

⁴ Ironically, although this reader writes to proclaim that his identity has been affirmed, he is left semi-anonymous by the journal which published his words (*Nation and Athenaeum* [4 August 1928], 590). He is identified only as "A.S.B." See Introduction to *Passage* xxiii. Among other Indian readers who have found in the novel an image of themselves they recognize, appreciate, and accept, see especially Das, Shahane, Singh, and Ali.

⁵ In a similar vein, Chaudhuri complained much earlier that "Aziz and his friends belong to the servile section and are all toadies" (22).

⁶ Two comments suggest Forster's appreciation of epistemological multiplicity: "I don't myself like the phrase 'the real India.' I suspect it. . . 'Real' is at the service of all schools of thought" (*Democracy* 316). And: "Religious people are vigorous because they identify a certain set of opinions with divine will, and stick to them alone. They are just as human as the non-religious, but more consistent. The non-religious man is distracted by the variety of human voices, one speaking truth at one moment, one at another. It seems impossible to him that anything so powerful and sympathetic as a human voice can be wrong" (quoted in Furbank 1: 112).

⁷ By playing with point of view like this in order to stage epistemological dilemmas for the reader, Forster does precisely what Ronald Schleifer accuses him of failing to do: "E. M. Forster articulates a sense of failure of civilization in his work, . . . but unlike the modernist writers, he does not *present* this crisis within the very discourse he offers us; his understanding of what is gone from the world is not *enacted* in his language" (54). Forster's experiments with narrative perspective may be less spectacular than the pyrotechnics of some other modernists, but the very subtlety through which he offers and withholds knowledge is an enactment of important, complex epistemological dilemmas.

⁸ For an insightful explication of these examples, see Hawkins 54-55. The conclusion Hawkins draws from them is not quite accurate, however: "The Anglo-Indians, as Forster presents them, act on emotional preconceptions rather than rational and open-minded examination of facts" (54). Although Forster thinks some prejudices are blinding, his novel questions whether "rationality" and "open-mindedness" are viable epistemological attitudes.

⁹ Readers of the novel have been divided over whether or not it endorses unity because they have heard one or the other of these notes. For example, contrast Stone, for whom the novel shows "that, for all our differences, we are in fact one" (339), with Wilde, who finds in the ending "an acceptance of life's and the self's profound disunities" (70), and with Rosecrance, who claims that "the perception of divine unity is not translatable into social or personal fulfillment" (236).

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Ida Arnold and the Detective Story: Reading *Brighton Rock*

BRIAN DIEMERT

In *Ways of Escape* Graham Greene says that while he began *Brighton Rock* in 1937 as a detective story "the first fifty pages . . . are all that remain of the detective story" and that they would have been removed if he had had the strength of mind to do so (WE 58, 60). However, there is something disingenuous about this claim, since the structure of the detective story is woven into the fabric of the novel and cannot be taken out with the surgical removal of a fixed number of pages. Whatever Greene may say, *Brighton Rock*, though it is many other things, is also a detective story. Like the detective story, which as Tzvetan Todorov and others note is a story of reading and interpretation, *Brighton Rock* makes reading a principal theme and so comments on how it is to be read. Within the narrative, scenes of reading abound while the residual structure of the detective story contains these within a larger interpretive frame that is the detective's investigation of a criminal's fictions. These thematic and structural concerns raise a number of points about reading in general and, by extension, about how critics have usually approached the novel. Like the stick of candy that gives the book its title and can be broken at any point to reveal its name "Brighton Rock," the novel, no matter where we look in it, always presents the critic with his or her own activity of reading and interpreting. The following discussion examines some of the critical issues that emerge from the critique of various reading strategies that the novel inscribes. By considering the narrative's handling of the detective-story plot, I hope to cast the novel in a new light and to expand the range of critical approaches that can be brought to bear on the text.

Central to the novel's presentation of interpretive issues is the character of Ida Arnold, who functions in a role analogous to the detective in classical detective stories such as those by Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, or Dorothy Sayers. Ida is the amateur investigator whose self-appointed task is to sift various clues and statements of witnesses for information that will help her to construct a true account of Hale's death. She, in fact, reads and interprets others' texts so that she can produce a narrative which is the story of what happened to Hale; and in this way she is also a figure analogous to the reader or critic of *Brighton Rock* who sifts the text for meaning in order to develop his or her own interpretation of the text.

In *Brighton Rock* it is quickly made clear that Hale's death is in some way precipitated by Pinkie's gang, though how they do this remains unclear throughout the novel. As the story opens, Fred Hale, fearing for his life, strikes up an acquaintance with Ida Arnold, a fun-loving, pragmatic woman who repeatedly insists on her knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. After Hale's death, Ida begins her own investigation in order to bring Pinkie to justice and to save Rose the suffering that Pinkie will inflict upon her. As well, Ida sees her quest as a chance to have a bit of fun (37).

Also quickly apparent to the reader acquainted with detective stories is that *Brighton Rock*'s narration treats Ida in quite a different manner from the way more orthodox detective stories treat their great detectives such as Dupin, Holmes, Poirot, Wimsey, or even Miss Marple. These characters are a part of Ida's lineage, yet, unlike them in their respective narratives, Ida is mocked by the narrative in which she appears: her understanding of the case and of the world she inhabits is clearly shown to be limited by her inability to see beneath the surface of things. Brighton for her is a place of fun and excitement, and life, though she takes it with "deadly seriousness" (36), is always "good" (19, 72), made up as it is for her with various physical sensations and corporal pleasures:

Life was sunlight on brass bedposts, Ruby port, the leap of the heart when the outsider you have backed passes the post and the colours go bobbing up. Life was poor Fred's mouth pressed down on hers in the taxi, vibrating with the engine along the parade. (36)

Ida's naive optimism, which we are told has "something dangerous and remorseless" (36) in it, and her spiritual blindness undercut her authority as an interpreter of events and partially account for the ironic tone that dominates many of the text's descriptions of her:

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Ida Arnold was on the right side. She was cheery, she was healthy, she could get a bit lit with the best of them. She liked a good time, her big breasts bore their carnality frankly down the Old Steyne [a Brighton street], but you had only to look at her to know that you could rely on her. She wouldn't tell tales to your wife, she wouldn't remind you next morning of what you wanted to forget, she was honest, she was kindly, she belonged to the great middle law-abiding class, her amusements were their amusements, her superstitions their superstitions (the planchette scratching the French polish on the occasional table, and the salt over the shoulder), she had no more love for anyone than they had. (80)

With the last clause Greene's irony expresses his scorn for both Ida and her class; hence it is not surprising that Ida, like comparable figures elsewhere in his novels (Mather and Raven in *A Gun For Sale* or Rowe in *The Ministry of Fear*), seems to have little in common with such fictional detectives as Holmes or Poirot. These figures are seldom in error and are usually presented as having powers of interpretation so refined as to render even the most opaque texts lucid and easily read. Consequently they are granted an authority by the society they serve and by the reader of their stories that elevates them above the norm and above the law. For these detectives all the universe is intelligible, and no mystery is so deep as to defy the power of intellect and reason.

However, in the decades following World War I this sort of single absolute authority is viewed with questioning eyes. The ideology that credits Holmes or Poirot with infallibility no longer has the same hold when cherished ideas of empire, social structure, and political hierarchy lie with the ruins of the war. In the thirties, with the depression, economic and political crises at home, and the rise of fascism and totalitarian states on the continent revealing the dangers of the single assured interpretation of events, intellectuals, especially those on the left such as Greene, came to view such interpretations and their authors with suspicion. Ida Arnold, then, stands apart from the confident, upper-class, male investigators of the classical detective story whose rational powers are honed to a razor's sharpness. Indeed, her belief in "ghosts, ouija boards, [and] tables which rapped" (36) makes her almost a parody of the Holmesian investigator. As the above passage makes clear, she is neither rational nor upper-class; instead, the text emphasizes her femininity (something Pinkie is particularly fearful of) and her ties to popular culture—two things which place Ida, if she is seen as an inscribed figure for the critical reader, outside the dominant

critical community of the interwar period typified and led by conservative and elitist figures such as I. A. Richards or F. R. and Q. D. Leavis.

Nonetheless, Greene's mocking tone when Ida is described suggests not only that Ida is incapable of loving but also that she lacks a sense of "higher," spiritual, things. (She boasts to Rose that "It's the world we got to deal with" [198], and elsewhere attention is drawn to her "old and vulgarized Grecian name" [16].) This perceived lack, perhaps more than anything else, has dominated readings of the novel because a conflation of interests has enabled critics, most of them male, to attack overtly Ida Arnold's character and her actions in the narrative while covertly dismissing critical approaches that focus on aspects of the secular, the feminine, or the popular in the novel. Ida is denigrated for her lack of spiritual awareness while Pinkie is elevated to tragic stature as the latest in a line extending from Macbeth and Milton's Satan through the damned heroes and heroines of the Romantics into the present because he professes a belief in a divine order against which he defiantly rebels: "*Credo in unum Satanum*" (165). In Pinkie's "dark theology" (114) the crucial difference is not between right and wrong but between Good and Evil.¹ Because Rose shares Pinkie's knowledge, she and Pinkie are presented in the text and in critical discussions as both complementary elements and morally superior to Ida and other characters like her such as Dallow, Cubitt, Colleoni, and Phil Corkery. The novel makes this point particularly clear in Rose's comments to Pinkie and in exchanges between Ida and Rose:

"Why, won't you lift a finger to stop him killing you?" [Ida asks.]

"He wouldn't do me any harm."

"You're young. You don't know things like I do."

"There's things *you* don't know." . . .

"I know one thing you don't. I know the difference between Right and Wrong. They didn't teach you *that* at school."

Rose didn't answer; the woman was quite right; the two words meant nothing to her. Their taste was extinguished by stronger foods—Good and Evil. The woman could tell her nothing she didn't know about these—she knew by tests as clear as mathematics that Pinkie was evil—what did it matter in that case whether he was right or wrong? (199)

On these occasions the narrative in *Brighton Rock* frequently, though sometimes uneasily, contrasts two distinct views of the world—the secular, one is tempted to say pagan, outlook of Ida and others, and the religious perception of Rose and Pinkie. For Greene the latter's point of

view is preferred to Ida's, since a spiritual awareness gives "some significance to living"; as Greene complained in his essay on François Mauriac, the absence of a spiritual context in novels by Woolf or Forster reduces the importance of the human act (CE 91).

In this context critics² grant Pinkie and Rose moral superiority on the basis of T. S. Eliot's remarks in his essay "Baudelaire" (1931), which Greene echoes in a 1934 essay, "Frederick Rolfe: Edwardian Inferno": "The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly evaded sanctity" (CE 131).³ Greene, then, is seen as bringing a "religious sense" (CE 91) into his novel with the result that Ida is easily read as one of the "lukewarm" (Rev. 3:16) who is of no consequence in the novel's religious world (Kunkel 102).

To read Pinkie or Ida in any of these ways is to set the book against traditionally canonical authors and their texts, and for traditionally minded critics this is easier to do than to look at it through the lens of less canonical popular works or genres, although such an approach, as Neil Nehring's recent article demonstrates, has tremendous potential for expanding our understanding of the text. If one looks at the novel from the perspective of other detective stories, a different generic structure emerges, and Ida becomes a central character conceived as both a literary heir to and a reaction against a tradition of extremely rational and esoteric amateur detectives. Like them she is highly observant—we are told, perhaps ironically, that "she missed nothing" (20)—and like them she seeks the truth (37). As well, as is the case with Poirot in Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, her task is explicitly figured as one of reading, only in her case the texts she reads, "Sukill" and "Fresuicilleye" (44), are literally occult ones provided by the ouija board and not by an author inscribed in the narrative such as Dr. Sheppard in Christie's novel. Greene may find Ida a flat character who refuses to come alive (WE 61); but, if we read *Brighton Rock* as a detective story and in the context of his other crime novels, Ida must be seen—whatever his view of her—as more than a spiritually ignorant character and therefore a figure to be mocked. As a detective, she differs only in trifles from Mather, Raven, Rowe, and even Mason in the short story "Murder for the Wrong Reason," and her spiritual blindness serves as one of the means particular to this novel of discrediting her authority.

Since the detective of the classical detective story is often perceived as a privileged character capable of placing an authoritative interpretation upon events—and so admired as a superman standing above and

beyond the law—Ida, like Greene's other detectives, is partially conceived in opposition to what William O. Aydelotte sees as the genre's incipient fascism (92–94). Indeed, as part of the “anti-fascist aesthetic” that Michael Denning detects in the “serious thrillers” of the thirties (66), the presentation of Ida demonstrates the period's distrust of the single authoritative point of view. Hence the interpretive limitations of any fictional detective and so of any reader are apparent in *Brighton Rock* and in Greene's other novels (Stratford 73): Ida's shortcomings as a detective reflect the difficulty of any single person's arriving at a definite, final understanding of events or of texts.

The text draws attention to this difficulty by suggesting that Pinkie's guilt in criminal matters is mitigated by a background of poverty (“Man is made by the places in which he lives,” the text tells us [37]) and by the presence of Colleoni, a self-described “business man” (64), who, though the leader of a vast criminal organization, is also well regarded by the Brighton police and by the Conservative party, which seeks to persuade him into politics (159). Similarly, although Ida succeeds in ridding society of the menace of Pinkie, she does nothing to alleviate the conditions that produced him; the source of the evil remains, just as Pinkie's voice remains on record and in the reader's mind at the end of the narrative. On one level, then, Ida is like the classical detective because she is the instrument of law and order but, on another level, the novel challenges the ideology of the classical detective story because the elimination of the criminal fails to purify the body politic which is plagued with systemic corruption.

Also indicating the difficulty of arriving at a final understanding of events or of texts is *Brighton Rock's* handling of the structure of the detective story. In the pure classical detective story that Todorov describes, the story of the crime becomes present in the text only through the story of the investigation; that is, the crime takes place outside the frame of the narrative and its details are revealed only in the course of the investigation. The events leading up to the crime make up a story that we see only through its periodic intrusion by means of clues, or ciphers, into the story of the investigation that we read. For Todorov this pattern reveals the two aspects that the Russian formalists identify as part of any story—*fabula*, the matter of the story, and *sjuzhet*, the structure that organizes and presents the story to the reader—where the *fabula* is revealed only through the *sjuzhet* while yet providing the *sjuzhet* with the material of its own existence. However, to determine which of these two precedes the other is a task fraught with ambiguity (Culler 183, 186).

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In *Brighton Rock* Ida explicitly takes as the starting point of her pursuit the place from which Hale disappeared (81) and then works to reconstruct the crime which, as even Pinkie realizes (86), is the standard investigative process. In a general sense, she traces over the previously laid path of Pinkie and his gang—an activity that is consistent with the classical detective story plot—and so figures the actions of the *sjuzhet* (the discourse) upon the material of the *fabula* (the story). Moreover, her retracing figures the act of writing that produces narrative as a rewriting of a narrative which is repressed in the later narrative, although the later narrative—the narrative of the investigation—offers clues which are the tangible signs marking the return of a repressed content.⁴ In *Brighton Rock* the two narratives of Ida and Pinkie, of investigation and crime (or of detective story and tragedy in R. W. B. Lewis's influential formulation⁵), are each the repressed content of the other: each reveals its presence in intermittent clues that surface into the mainstream of the other narrative. However, whichever way we choose to view *Brighton Rock* depends on our point of view; as Todorov observes, the twin concepts of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* are essentially two different ways of looking at the same thing (46).

Ida's pursuit of Pinkie intensifies his efforts to avoid capture. As she proceeds in her reading of events she uncovers indications of Pinkie's story marked in the narrative's details, which in more orthodox detective fiction are formalized as clues: things such as Hale's dislike of Bass beer (a point revealed early in the novel [10] and given importance later on) and his confession that he was "going to die" (18) arouse Ida's "instincts" so that she senses that "there [is] something odd" about his death (31). Details that come out after his death, such as the fact that he used a false name (31), had bruises on his arms (79), and left a restaurant without eating despite telling Ida he was hungry (33), confirm her suspicions while at the same time revealing details of Pinkie's story.

As the novel continues, it becomes clear that Ida's investigation of Hale's death forces Pinkie's actions. Since the official investigators agree that Hale died of natural causes, they have closed the case (78–80), and so it is only Ida whom Pinkie has to fear. Just as it is the reader who imaginatively realizes the narrative content of the text, so does Ida's search originate, explain, and validate all Pinkie's actions from his courtship of Rose to his murder of Spicer to his attempt to arrange Rose's suicide. To be sure, Pinkie fears that the police may ask questions about the man who left the card at Snow's, but, as we realize, the police do not and will not reopen their inquiry. In their place, though, is Ida.

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In this sense, the story of the investigation determines the story of the crime; although, conversely, it is Pinkie's story that gives rise to the detective narrative. The two lines of action in the novel are entangled in each other with each standing as the origin of the other: Ida's investigation uncovers the contents of Pinkie's story, but the narrative that describes Pinkie's activities also becomes the means by which Ida's story is revealed to the reader. Indeed, the question of origin is complicated further by the fact that the disturbance that excites the narrative of *Brighton Rock* into being—the murder of Hale—is considered an act of revenge: the initial action in *Brighton Rock* is taken only in response to an earlier action—the murder of Kite—whose story, though sporadically erupting into Pinkie's story (63, 218–19), lies in another narrative;⁶ as the text explicitly remarks, "The whole origin of the thing was lost" (217). As a model of narrative mechanics, then, *Brighton Rock* figures two things—the ability of narrative to perpetuate itself by inscribing within itself at least two separate narrative strands that generate and then feed on each other, and the reader's role in the construction of narrative.

Greene's handling of the classical detective story's structure demonstrates the indeterminate nature of the *fabula/sjuzhet* distinction. As *Brighton Rock* stands, the story of the detection is interrupted by the story of the criminal, which reveals details of the crime;⁷ the two stories are presented in roughly alternating chapters occurring more or less along a shared time line, although each persistently underlies the other. The reader, then, gains knowledge of the circumstances of Hale's death from two sources. As the novel continues, the two stories of the investigation and the crime become blurred as each begins to include the other. One illustration of how this works can be seen by looking at part 4, section 1 (99–120), where Pinkie and Spicer are at the race track. Although the story line in the foreground tells of Pinkie's betrayal of Spicer to Colleoni's men, we receive glimpses of the other narrative line involving Ida. Spicer tells Pinkie about a woman who "backed Black Boy for a pony" (103). We then find out that Black Boy won the race, and again Spicer mentions the woman who now has won so much money (104); the narrative goes on to report that Pinkie "heard a laugh, a female laugh" which is attributed to the woman who won on Black Boy (104–05). The woman, of course, is Ida, who bets on a tip Hale gave her before he disappeared and, more important, wins the money she needs to enable her to continue her investigation.

Because Ida's investigation of events, metaphorically figured in her reading of an occult text, both reveals and determines the text she

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reads, *Brighton Rock* figures the relationship of readers to texts. Both stand apart from each other, just as *fabula* and *sjuzhet* do in theory, but, in the moment of reading, text and reader interact in such a way that the text directs the reader while the reader produces the text. The relationship, like that between Ida and Pinkie, is symbiotic and without origin. For both to exist reading must always already be present. The narrative exists only insofar as it is a thing that is being or has been read—even if only by its author, who does not create out of nothing but out of his or her own experience with other narratives. The question of the primacy of reading or writing (narrative production) is insoluble, for each relies on the other. To use Barthes's term, the already-read (*déjà-lu*) is always behind any literary production ("From work" 160, *SLZ* 20 ff.). Hence reading a text actualizes that text for the reader by inscribing it in his or her consciousness where it previously did not exist. At the same time, the text which is read is determined by the reader who reads what he or she is, in a sense, programmed to read through his or her experience of the "already-read." This phenomenon is what lies behind the differing judgments on *Brighton Rock*: probable or improbable plot, proletarian novel or moral allegory, detective story or religious drama, light fiction or serious literature, entertainment or tragedy, and so on. However it is seen, the novel is the product of a unique interpretive act. What the narrative shows us is both how these differences are generated and how they coexist within the textual field of the novel.

Perhaps more than in other detective stories, *Brighton Rock* makes the reading process a concern from its first page, when we find Hale as Kolley Kibber following a route (itself prescribed by a text) through Brighton in search of someone who has a copy of *The Daily Messenger* in hand and who can repeat a prepared text: "You are Mr. Kolley Kibber. I claim the *Daily Messenger* prize" (5). Language is thus explicitly figured as a code. The text of the novel stresses that the claim must be made "in the proper form of words" (5), and hence the possibility of arriving at a correct, univocal reading of a text, of fully understanding the code, is implied. Simultaneously, however, an allusion to Colley Cibber's introduces another level of meaning that subverts the overt claim that a text can be read in only one way; and, since the challenge Hale receives ultimately results in his death, the notion of reading for a single meaning, of saying that this novel means this or that it is about that, is presented as inadequate.

This idea is confirmed in the larger investigation of reading enacted in the novel. As the detective, Ida is the reader of the fictions

that Pinkie creates to explain Hale's, Spicer's, and, though the last does not occur, Rose's deaths. In producing these fictions, Pinkie makes use of tangible signs which are intended to mislead their reader. The cards he has Spicer lay along Hale's route are meant to stand as the visible traces of Hale's presence, as Hale's signature. Similarly, in preparing the story of Rose's suicide, Pinkie makes use of a note that Rose herself has written and insists that she "add a piece" to explain her death (231)—as if a few words could adequately explain the complicated relationship between Pinkie and Rose and so justify the suicide of a teen-age girl, especially one who considers the act damning. In both instances, and particularly in the latter, Pinkie's fictions are explicitly tied to the production of written texts, and in this way the act of detection that involves the reading of these texts mirrors the activity of the novel's reader and of reading in general.

Like the novel's reader, Ida sifts the stories that emerge from her interrogations of numerous witnesses—Molly, the bartender, the police, Crab, Cubitt, Dallow, and, most important, Rose—for traces of an underlying, suppressed narrative that tells the story of Hale's death. Explicit references to Ida as an interpreter of written texts strengthen the identification between her and the reader of this or any other text. This identification is figured early in the novel in Ida's interpretation of the ouija board's messages (43–44), in her assertion that Tate's mistake of writing "Black Dog" for "Black Boy" means "Care" (70), and in her reading of the police report on Hale's death (79). However, what the narrative stresses about Ida's particular method of reading is her certainty and her confidence in her own interpretive skills which, she believes, enable her always to detect *the* meaning of a particular linguistic construction. In the midst of a conversation between Phil Corkery and Ida, we are told that "In every word either of them uttered she detected the one meaning" (145). Similarly, the text implies the importance of the already read to Ida's own reading by remarking on her past experience as a reader:

She said slowly over to herself: "... Brighton Rock ..." The clue would have seemed hopeless to many women, but Ida Arnold had been trained by the Board. Queerer thing than that had spidered out under her fingers and Old Crowe's: with complete confidence her mind began to work. (163)

For Ida, texts "must mean something" (44) which is to say, given the importance she attaches to being right, that they must have an unequivocal and determinable sense which closes itself off from ambiguity and plurality. To write "Black Dog" instead of "Black Boy"

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means "Care," and no further explanation is seen by Ida as necessary, nor is one forthcoming.

What is interesting about Ida's approach to reading is that the novel repeatedly denies its validity by showing it to be limited and self-reflecting. Sherlock Holmes may be able to assert confidently in *A Study in Scarlet* (1888) that "rache" means "revenge," but fifty years later Ida's equally confident assertions are opened to questioning and doubt. Not only is her authority as a detective undercut by her self-righteous sense of justice and her pagan sensibility in the face of Pinkie's and Rose's religious awareness, but her very certainty in matters of interpretation embodies a delusive sense of the world and of language that, as Phil Corkery or Clarence would say, is "terrible" (222, 244): Ida's conclusions are often both error-ridden and misguided. Although she does finally track Pinkie down, her understanding of the circumstances surrounding Hale's death remains vague. Indeed, as the novel progresses Ida explains Hale's death as suicide (44, 75-76), murder (163), and the result of a heart attack brought on by fear (197). Nowhere in the text, however, is an account of Hale's death given, although some critics such as A. A. De Vitis (68) and Norman Sherry (636) suggest otherwise by stating that Hale choked to death on a piece of Brighton rock candy which was pushed down his throat. As Ida realizes, "Brighton Rock" is undoubtedly a clue to the circumstances of Hale's death, but its meaning remains undefined. Similarly, for Greene's readers "Brighton Rock" is also a seemingly significant piece of information since it is both the novel's title and a recurring phrase in the narrative, although just how it is significant remains open to interpretation.

Ida's understanding of Pinkie and Rose is also inhibited by her lack of a religious sense and her adherence to a middle-class vision of society. Unable to see otherwise, she assumes that her world is the only world; when she looks out the window, she sees only the city she knows (72). She cannot see what is not part of her experience and so is blind to the dark side of Brighton—the poverty, the crime, the early deaths of so many young people.⁹ For this reason she is completely ignorant of the knowledge that comes with the experience of poverty. The point is driven home at the end of her second of three encounters with Rose:

"He doesn't love you [Rose]."

"I don't care," the childish voice stubbornly murmured.

"What do you mean, you don't care?"

"I love *him*."

"You're acting morbid," Ida said. "If I was your mother I'd

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give you a good hiding. What'd your father and mother say if they knew?"

"They wouldn't care."

"And how do you think it will all end?"

"I don't know."

"You're young. That's what it is," Ida said, "romantic. I was like you once. You'll grow out of it. All you need is a bit of experience." The Nelson Place eyes stared back at her without understanding: driven to her hole the small animal peered out at the bright and breezy world; in the hole were murder, copulation, extreme poverty, fidelity and the love and fear of God, but the small animal had not the knowledge to deny that only in the glare and open world outside was something which people called experience. (123)

By invoking the authority of Rose's parents, Ida reveals her own middle-class conception of family life. What she never realizes, however, is that families in Nelson Place, where Rose grew up, and in Paradise Piece, where Pinkie was raised, are conditioned by their poverty. When, in the novel's penultimate section—a location in the detective narrative that is traditionally where the detective's summation concludes the story—Ida sits back with her friend Clarence and summarizes the case, she asserts that "What [Rose] needs at a time like that is her mother and dad" (243). This assertion characteristically renders the narrator's previous comment, "Ida Arnold had an answer to everything" (243), ironic, since we have seen how Rose's parents are brought out of one of their "moods" (141) with no less than the sale of their daughter to Pinkie for fifteen guineas (143). Despite being criticized for being "so terribly certain about things" (222), Ida fails to recognize how her preconceptions color her interpretation and so does not see that her reading of Rose collapses.

Similarly, Ida's dubious reading of written texts equally undercuts our confidence in her interpretive skills. In explaining the ouija board's "Fresuicilleye", she asserts: "It's clear as clear. *Fre* is short for Fred and *Suici* for Suicide and Eye; that's what I always say—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. . . . See that *Eye*. That as good as tells me what to do" (44). Here Ida's interpretation of "eye" reflects her own ideology based on a conception of Old Testament justice. In other words, she reads, like any reader, what she is programmed to read: she creates the text, as it were, in her own image. The other parts of her interpretation here are equally questionable in light of subsequent developments; "Fre" may be a cipher for Fred (though this is not Hale's real name), but "suici" as "suicide" is unlikely given the information she uncovers about

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Hale's death. And the two "I's" remain enigmatic since she cannot interpret them at this point in the novel. Toward the end of the book she rereads the board's text and concludes that "The Board had foreseen it all—Sui, its own word for the scream, the agony, the leap [of Pinkie]" (245). Significantly, however, the two "I's" remain unaccounted for: Ida's reading is incomplete. She never discovers the method of or the reasons for Hale's death, though as readers we understand that in some way these reasons lie in the fact that Hale is implicated in the murder of Kite. As a detective and as a model of critical authority Ida fails to gain our confidence; consequently we can only be suspicious of her claims to certainty and her authority as a figure of justice.

Nonetheless, if *Brighton Rock* demonstrates the limitations of any reading, it also insists upon the necessity of reading. Just as G. K. Chesterton described every detail within the urban landscape as a sign to be read by the detective in his or her search for truth (159), so is every detail within a detective story of potential significance to the reader's interpretation of the narrative. In *Brighton Rock* the experience of the world is figured in terms of reading; Brighton is explicitly a world of text. Rose's father's face is "marked deeply with the hieroglyphics of pain and patience and suspicion" (142); "the edge of the sea [is] like a line of writing in whitewash: big sprawling letters" (152); and Ida herself is likened by the narrative to an enigmatic text that insists it be read: "She stood there like a wall at the end of an alley scrawled with the obscene chalk messages of an enemy" (196). Reading is presented as an unavoidable activity, and, because humanity has a deep-seated desire for intelligibility—for things to make sense—those who claim for themselves the authority to offer explanations (such as the police, Ida, and even Pinkie) are shown to have power over others. In the case of the police, society assigns them the task of determining whether or not a crime has been committed, and they produce their own reading of Hale's death. Their report offers a univocal interpretation that also preserves their power because in their eyes and in the eyes of the society the case is solved. The closing of the case thus maintains an impression of efficiency which, in turn, justifies the authority conferred upon them.

Ida's own "certain" reading of events is shown to be no less powerful, as her investigation is explicitly seen to be the motivating pressure behind Pinkie's actions: Rose thinks Ida is "the explanation" for Pinkie's behavior (196), and Dallow blames Ida for what happens in the novel: "This [the attempt on Rose's life] is your doing. You made him marry her, you made him . . ." (236). The source of Ida's power

over those like Rose and, to a lesser extent, Pinkie who are not as sure of their interpretive skills is her belief in her own righteousness. For Pinkie, Rose, Cubitt, Dallow, and Spicer, Ida is frightening because they cannot place her: "'She scares me,' Rose whispered. 'I don't know what she wants'" (112). the problem is that Pinkie's gang cannot place Ida and Phil Corkery in any context that would provide an interpretive key for a reading of them: "'Who are you?' Rose implored her. 'Why do you interfere with us? You're not the police'" (196). The question of who Ida is plagues Pinkie (100, 127), Rose (138, 196), and Dallow (232); none is able to read her, and so Ida has power over them, both because she cannot be read correctly and because she believes in her ability to decode the texts they present. In one sense, Ida's power is apparent in the ease with which she is able to gain the confidences of men; in another sense, her power is clearly seen in her influence on events in the narrative: she pressures Pinkie into killing Spicer and into attempting to kill Rose; she persuades Dallow to help rescue Rose; and she returns Rose to her parents (243).

Similarly, the source of Pinkie's power over Rose is, in part, his confidence in his reading of things and his corresponding belief that one can construct univocal fictions that will be read in only one way. Rose, on the other hand, is uncertain and unable to read the various texts she confronts in the world:

She went cautiously down—seven o'clock—what furious faces—in the hall a ball of paper scuffled under her feet. She smoothed it out and read a pencilled message: 'Lock your door. Have a good time.' She didn't understand it: it might as well have been in code—she assumed it must have something to do with this foreign world where you sinned on a bed and people lost their lives suddenly and strange men hacked at your door and cursed you in the night. (190)

To Rose, Pinkie is both knowledgeable and accurate in his readings. In contrast to her own textual ignorance, his skill lies in his ability to manipulate texts and language for his own ends. Hence he can deceive Rose into believing that he loves her and convince her that suicide is the only way to escape the prospect of their separation.

He watched her closely while he did his sleight of hand, passing off his idea as hers. "I got the car all ready. We could go out into the country where no one would hear . . ." He measured her terror carefully and before she could pass the card back to him, he changed his tone. "That's only if the worst comes to the worst." The phrase intrigued him: he repeated it: the worst—that was the stout woman with her glassy righteous eye coming

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up the smoky road—to the worst—and that was drunken ruined Mr Prewitt watching from behind the curtains for just one typist. (213)

As Pinkie realizes, the source of his power lies in the phrase itself because it can influence the actions of others, and for this reason he insists on Rose adding a piece to her suicide note because he wants others—Ida and the police—to read his fiction in a certain way; and, in this regard, he shares Ida's conception of reading. Like her, he assumes that a text can direct its reader in a single interpretation.

As the novel makes clear, however, the power Pinkie and Ida think they have, because it is based on its own fiction of univocal reading, is illusory; despite her claims and his intentions, their sense of reading is shown to be limited and incomplete. Not mindful of his own belief that "it [is] the little things which [trip] you up" (27), Pinkie continues to attempt to construct what Barthes in *S/Z* would call "readerly" texts that will close off all but one reading. However, as quickly becomes apparent, "little things" in these texts, such as Spicer's leaving one of Kolley Kibber's cards in Snow's, Spicer's being photographed, Rose's realizing that Spicer was not Kolley Kibber, and a host of other things open Pinkie's fictions to other ways of reading. Consequently, as each of Pinkie's fictions reveals its status as a fiction, he is compelled to create another fiction which will both account for and cover up the weaknesses in the previous one. His efforts to conceal the facts of Hale's death lead him to kill Spicer, which necessitates efforts to hide the truth about Spicer's death which, in turn, lead to the fiction of Rose's suicide. The chain of fictions could go on without end—something he despairingly acknowledges: "There wasn't any end to what he had begun" (106). Each murder he commits and each corresponding fiction he constructs is an attempt to control the reading of the initial crime because each seeks to be the final "true" account of what happened, though this status is shown to be forever elusive.

In linking power to the construction of readerly texts and authoritative readings and then in exposing the impossibility of this construction, *Brighton Rock* expresses a radical skepticism about any person or institution that claims for itself the ability to discern and present a single meaning or truth. (And it is in this context that the priest's final comments to Rose about no one being able to conceive of "the . . . appalling . . . strangeness of the mercy of God" [246] have their place as the authority of Church doctrine is also questioned.¹⁰) The consequences of this kind of skepticism are, indeed, very far reaching, since it undermines the basis of any kind of authority whether political.

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religious, or critical. The power of these authorities, like the power of Ida and Pinkie, is based on a deluded sense of their own ability to determine what is "true," and so in this way *Brighton Rock* urges a method of reading that can guard against both political and intellectual domination and reveals what Nehring sees as Greene's "anarchist" politics (227).

What is apparent from this discussion is the cost of any interpretation that claims for itself a final authority. Ida as a figure for the reader is also a figure for the critic of the novel who, like her, sees in the text what he or she is already programmed to see at the expense of dismissing or passing over entirely those aspects of a text that may be most crucial to its structural and linguistic integrity. *Brighton Rock* presents its reader with a vision of a world where any attempt to make sense of something is doomed to failure. In the end there is only the mystery of narrative's power to draw us toward meaning while forever pushing it away from us.

NOTES

¹ Kunkel (107), Hall (116), and O'Prey (73) are critical of Ida's blatantly secular outlook, while Lewis (243), Kelly (41), and Hall (116) are three of many critics who think of Pinkie as a tragic figure.

² See, for example, Davis (23), Kunkel (109), O'Prey (71), Stratford (72), Webster (101), and Zabel (36).

³ Eliot's remarks are based on *Revelation* 3:14-16 and read as follows:

So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least, we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. (183)

In this context "damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life because it at last gives some significance to living" (181).

⁴ In this reading of the detective story plot I am indebted to Peter Brooks, especially where he discusses Conan Doyle's story "The Musgrave Ritual," (23-26).

⁵ Lewis's essay "The 'Trilogy' of Graham Greene" has appeared in a number of forms since its first publication in a 1957 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* (vol. 3, 195-215). Not only did Lewis make it the core of his chapter on Greene in his book *The Picaresque Saint*, but numerous editors such as Harry J. Cargas, Samuel Hynes, and Harold Bloom have included Lewis's remarks either in whole or in part in their collections of critical essays on Greene's work.

⁶ It is interesting to note that in *A Gun for Sale* Raven's past includes

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working for a Brighton race gang: the murder of Kite is one of the things he confesses to Anne.

⁷ One could, of course, reverse this and say that the criminal's story is interrupted by the story of the investigation. And it is interesting to observe that Pinkie, like Ida, struggles with an enigma which in his case is the question of Ida's identity, a problem that he and his followers turn to frequently in the text (for example, 100, 196, 232). (The enigma Ida struggles with is, of course, the mystery of Hale's death.) In this way, too, the stories of the investigation and of the investigated are inverted.

⁸ Colley Cibber was poet laureate from 1730 to 1757 and is generally considered one of the worst poets to hold the post. (He is attacked by Pope in *The Dunciad*.) That Greene echoes the name of an author, particularly an author who is perhaps better known for his satiric portrait in Pope's *Dunciad* than for his own work, again raises questions of textuality from the opening pages of *Brighton Rock*.

⁹ Aside from Pinkie, Hale, and Spicer, who all die in the course of the novel, various young women are mentioned periodically as the casualties of Brighton's poverty and crime: Peggy Baron, scarred with vitriol (47); Violet Crow, "violated and buried under the West Pier" (142); Annie Collins, suicide on the rail tracks (165); and Molly Carthew, also a suicide (199). In addition, the *News of the World* that Pinkie reads bears the headline "Assault on Schoolgirl in Epping Forest" (200). In this context the experience of Rose, who is tempted to suicide by Pinkie, becomes in many ways typical of Brighton's poor young women.

¹⁰ This forces a reconsideration at the end of the novel of the whole problem of Ida's moral inferiority when placed alongside the religious sense of Pinkie and Rose. In this light it is, perhaps, significant that it is the priest who suggests that Ida may have been right (246).

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Jean Rhys, Paul Theroux, and the Imperial Road

TERESA F. O'CONNOR

Toward the end of her life Jean Rhys offered many of the private papers and manuscripts still in her possession for sale through the booksellers Bertram Rota, Ltd. Their catalogue listed an unpublished story, "The Imperial Road," with the notation: "Miss Rhys has stated that her publishers declined to include this story in *Sleep It Off, Lady*, considering it to be too anti-negro in tone" (7). The story was never published and its major components never appeared in any of Rhys's other work.¹ Though I was familiar with the manuscript, two stories in Paul Theroux's collection *World's End* spurred my interest in a closer reading of Rhys's unpublished one.

World's End contains two consecutive and connected pieces: the first, "Zombies," is clearly a portrait of the elderly Jean Rhys and refers to the reasons why "The Imperial Road" was not published. Theroux's second story, "The Imperial Ice House," renders a variant of Rhys's "The Imperial Road," thereby tendering a further subtextual comment on its rejection by her publishers.

In "Zombies" Miss Bristow, an aged writer originally from the island of "Isabella," lives in exile in England. She is courted by the literati who have recently rediscovered her and her work after a long disappearance. ("She knew the talk that people believed she had been dead for years. . . . She could not remember when people had listened to her so keenly. She began to write again" [27].) "Zombies" is related from the point of view of Miss Bristow, a fragile and fearful alcoholic. From her profession and history to her posture and presence, Miss Bristow immediately calls to mind Jean Rhys.

At a party Miss Bristow meets Philippa, a young editor from

Howlett's, her publishing house. Philippa, who is "bright and dull" and who never fully understands Miss Bristow's sarcasm and irony, is anxious to please the now famous writer and to do well at the publishing house. Toward the end of the story, it is Philippa's job to report to Miss Bristow that Howlett's will not publish "the icehouse story" in Miss Bristow's forthcoming collection. As Philippa haltingly tells her this, Miss Bristow reflects on the volume as "an old woman's book, rather a monochrome, all memory, without adornment or invention" (36)—a suitable description of *Sleep It Off, Lady*, Rhys's last book of fiction. Though Philippa tells Miss Bristow that the story is "easily one of the best-written things" she's done, she finally agrees with her superiors, who will not publish it because "It's anti-Negro."

I had no doubt that Miss Bristow and her story were based on Jean Rhys and her experience with the publication history of "The Imperial Road." It also seemed likely that there might be a connection, in either style or content, between the second Theroux story, "The Imperial Ice House," and Rhys's unpublished one. Certainly their titles were similar. A comparison of the Rhys manuscript and Theroux's story suggest no strong stylistic relationship but there certainly are thematic connections.

"The Imperial Ice House" is about a white newcomer to a Caribbean Island who, unaccustomed to the realities of life there, decides one day to haul a cart containing a large block of ice back to his plantation using the labor of three of his black workers. The ice melts; the cart, under its great burden, begins to break; the horse resists; and the black workers, first cajoled and then threatened by the planter finally, under the hot sun, on the lonely difficult road to the plantation, murder the planter with the icepick.

I was curious to know whether Theroux had ever seen Rhys's story or whether Rhys had seen Theroux's. And, even if Rhys was not aware of Theroux's reference to her and her work, I was interested in the underlying significance of this literary alliance, particularly because Jean Rhys, as a person and as a writer, seems to have attracted other writers who use elements of her personality and history as the bases for characters in their own fiction. These relationships have been written about by Martien Kappers-den Hollander and Paul Delaney, who in particular discuss characters based on Jean Rhys in the works of Rhys's first husband, Jean Lenglet, and in Ford Madox Ford's novel *When the Wicked Man*.²

Rhys used herself as the model for most of her protagonists and created other characters occasionally based on some of the writers who used her as a prototype.³ Rhys and all these writers lived or live in some

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form of exile: Ford on the Continent and in the United States; Lenglet in France; Plante in England; Theroux in Africa, Asia, and now, intermittently, England. Theroux's fiction, in *World's End* and other novels and stories, is often concerned, like Rhys's, with alienation, colonialism, and the experience of being a stranger. It may be that Theroux, Lenglet, Ford, and Plante share with Rhys uprootedness and continual homelessness—an experience that is voiced intensely in all of Rhys's writing and mirrored in the often sad facts of her life.

Paul Theroux's two stories make use not only of Jean Rhys as a person and writer but of her writing as well. I put some of my questions about his relationship to Rhys and about the two stories in *World's End* in a letter to Theroux. His response follows:

I did not know J. Rhys well but I did meet her a few times and had lunch with her, on a couple of occasions. Certainly the character in "Zombies" resembles her. I never saw "The Imperial Road" but of course knew about its rejection, and that fascinated me—I mean, the reasons. My own story is supposed to be connected, though you are the first person to inquire—which is why I am replying. I feel fairly sure that Rhys never saw my story.⁴

In an earlier letter I asked Diana Athill, Rhys's friend and publisher, similar questions. Athill's answer addresses both the quality of Rhys's story and the racial content, as well as her belief that Rhys knew nothing of the Theroux stories. She writes:

Whether or not Jean knew Paul Theroux, or his writing, I can't tell you. I'd guess not . . . I never heard her mention him.

It was the querulous tone of 'The Imperial Road' which made both Francis W[yndham] and me tell Jean that we liked it less than her other work. She often used to talk querulously, or indignantly, about black people, like any other old exiled member of the Caribbean plantocracy: why had they hated 'us' so much? Hadn't they been better off in her youth, when 'we' were running things? Look how they had ruined everything since then! Silly, sentimental liberals, she thought us. . . . She wasn't surprised when we disliked 'The Imperial Road.' . . . And I never told her what I really felt, which was that she had lost her grip on her style in that story. . . . In the story it was the voice of her ordinary, non-writing self that one heard. Her strength had ebbed.

I agree with Athill that "The Imperial Road" is not up to Rhys's best writing. In fact, the piece seems never to have been finished as a work

of fiction.⁵ Though "The Imperial Road" does, at moments, transcend its incomplete quality, the story remains an essay in memory and recollection. But the manuscript reveals, perhaps more than Rhys's autobiography, some of her feelings in later life toward the island that figured so strongly in her fiction.

Like "The Imperial Ice House," Rhys's story involves an unsuccessful trek across a Caribbean island. Both stories are concerned with tensions between the white plantocracy and the black workers. Unlike Theroux, however, Rhys here has no ironic distance from her protagonist.

The narrator of "The Imperial Road" describes a return trip she and her English husband took to her native island of Dominica. Like Rhys herself, the narrator had not returned to her island since she left as a young woman of "just about sixteen" (2). The couple make a brief visit to Roseau, the capital of Dominica, and then rent a house on the Atlantic side of the island. They spend about six weeks on the estate and when it is time to leave, the narrator convinces her husband that, instead of taking a launch to return to Roseau, they should walk across the island along the old Imperial Road—a thoroughfare built by the British and intended to link both sides of the island. Before beginning the hike, the narrator says, "I was perfectly certain that it must still exist" (11).

The couple start out with two guides: "a Martinique man" whom she describes as "the grimmest-looking negro I had ever seen" (11) and a black Dominican who "seemed quite pleasant . . . [and] a bit weak-willed" (12). At first things go "splendidly" and the wife feels as if she "were back in . . . [her] girlhood, setting out on some wonderful adventure which would certainly end happily" (12). But soon "the road wasn't a road any longer but a steep uphill track" (13). The narrator twists her ankle and is led by the two guides to the home of a woman who will rent them a mule. The woman, like most of the blacks in this story, is "decidedly unfriendly" to the white woman and, as she tends the wounded ankle, says, "I don't do this for *you*, for I know who you are and for one of your family I would do *nothing*. I do it for your husband for I hear that he's a good man and kind to all" (13-14).

Later, when the wife mounts the mule outside, she is thrown from it and begins to cry, only to stop when she notices the "Martinique man's expression of contempt" (14). Soon after, when the couple get caught in a sudden downpour, they and the guides finally come upon a large manicured estate rented by Americans, who welcome them and arrange for them to drive back to Roseau, where they stay again at the La Paz

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hotel and are given champagne and sandwiches in their room by its kindly owner, Violet. (Both the La Paz and Violet are the actual names and are referred to by both Rhys and Alec Waugh in their correspondence. The fact that Rhys changed neither points again to her not having turned this episode into fiction.)

As the couple goes to bed, the wife says, "I'm absolutely certain that wasn't the Imperial Road at all. It's quite impossible it should have disappeared without leaving any trace. That Martinique man must have took us wrong . . . for it to absolutely disappear isn't possible" (17). Her husband falls asleep and the narrator concludes the tale with these words:

I lay awake for a long time asking myself if I could conceivably have imagined this ceremony with the administrator in his best uniform, in gold lace, cocked hat and a sword (not I'm not [sic] sure about the sword, but I am about the cocked hat and uniform). The band played, the crowd cheered and he made a little speech declaring the Imperial Road across the island open to all traffic. I couldn't have imagined it and the Imperial Road couldn't have disappeared without a trace, it just wasn't possible. No Imperial Road or a trace of it. Just darkness, cut trees, creepers and it just wasn't possible. (17-18)

This closing monologue is in marked contrast to the opening of the story, in which the narrator stands on deck as her boat approaches Dominica. She watches the mountains, marvels at their beauty and concludes, "Not changed. As I remembered" (1). This motif of remembering and forgetting, change and immutability nervously checkers the opening sections of the story. Again, at the opening, the narrator says of the bay at Roseau, "That was all as it had been I think" (1), and of the town she later says, "The whole town was changed though how exactly, I couldn't think" (8). Clearly Rhys's story in part deals with the emotional risk and danger the exile courts when she attempts to go home. Exile becomes more profound because, in addition to the physical removal from home that the exile experiences, returning home after such a long time delineates another remove: that caused simply by the passing of time, and the alienation this involves when compounded by the refraction of memory—a triple remove. The narrator in "The Imperial Road," testing her memory about the way things were, reminds one of Joyce's letters from exile to Dubliners, asking for topographical details of the city of his youth.

The opening of "The Imperial Road" reveals the story's concern with and attitude about people of color. The first line begins: "I was on

deck watching the Dominican mountains and talking to a young coloured man" (1). A little further on, the narrator, describing the La Paz bar, somewhat contentiously asserts:

The place was quite full of coloured men, no black ones. And here I must explain that for me coloured people were half white or quarter white. Black people were negroes. . . . I'd always understood that negroes and coloured people were very different indeed. Coloured people, I'd been brought up to think, were of all shades and all sorts; some were beautiful and very intelligent; some had the worst qualities of both races—they were often troublemakers and often treacherous. They *hated*. (13–14)

The stance of the narrator here is defiant in its insistence that she will use the pseudo-scientific language of institutionalized racism, the delineation of groups into "black" or "negro" and "coloured," reminiscent of the attempt in racist societies to define a person's race by percentages of black "blood" using such terms as mulatto, octoroon, and quadroon.

Throughout "The Imperial Road" the narrator's perception is that the people of color she encounters are especially hostile to her because of her family's connection to colonialism and the plantation system dating from the time of slavery. The narrator's voice at times borders on paranoia, and the depiction of the blacks is reductive. Their words are imbued with hostility and they seem to pose a physical threat. But probably worst of all, the narrator's/Rhys's perception is that they want to deny a white colonial's claim to her past—represented by the "disappearance" not only of the Imperial Road but of other locations. She says, "for I soon gathered that any reference to Roseau of [sic] Dominica as it used to be was received either with disbelief or a pained annoyed expression. . . . Every time I suggested a road which might show off the beauties of Dominica . . . [the driver] said, 'There's no road there'" (8–9).

Clearly, the actual Imperial Road—its inauguration, its existence—is important to the narrator; and it was important to Rhys too. This is not Rhys's only reference to the opening or the existence and disappearance of the Imperial Road. In a brief correspondence Rhys had with Alec Waugh, most of Rhys's letter to him is concerned with the road.⁶

In his book *The Sugar Islands* Waugh recounts his travels in the Caribbean and in a chapter on Dominica talks about the Imperial Road. He says that a "broad surfaced thoroughfare . . . was planned to link the windward and the leeward coasts," but bad conditions and costs

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"curtailed and finally liquidated the enterprise" (90-91). Later the project was renewed but again, because of costs and inefficiency, it was abandoned so that "today [ca. 1949] . . . there is nothing to show except a track of cobbles through the jungle" (92). In another section of the book Waugh refers to Jean Rhys, describing her as a Dominican writer whose work he admires and whom he had met in England. Waugh's book prompted Rhys to write a letter to him (probably in the early 1950s). Though her letter reflects pleasure at his mention of her, in the main she addresses the question of the existence of the Imperial Road:

What happened, I wonder, to the 1st Imperial Road. That was nearly finished when I was a small child or supposed to be nearly finished. I can remember the opening ceremony. The administrator, whose name was Hasketh Bell, wore a cocked hat and cut a ribbon with silver scissors I think. Perhaps the next man disliked Dominica or the money dried up. . . .

But about the Imperial Road. We tried the walk from Hampstead . . . when we were there before the war. We did manage it and arrived at the Paz late at night and utterly exhausted.

Certainly I was. Violet whom you thought slow and lazy but I doubt if she is had two bottles of champagne on ice waiting for us. It was a lovely feeling then. So triumphant.

However, it was an awful walk. It rained all the time. A kind woman lent me a mule half way, and I fell off the first time there. Was a steep downwards bit of road.

The Martinique guide swore. Why a Martinique man? I don't know. But the Dominica one said, "Do not cry Madame." The Dominicans can be very gentle. The country people mean. But the Martinique men are completely cynical. Did you notice? (Campbell 59)

Some of the differences between Rhys's letter and her story indicate that Rhys may have tried to "fictionalize" the experience, either in the manuscript or in the letter. Certainly the letter treats the material in a more lighthearted manner than does the story. Rhys's letter is tinged with nostalgia and seeming attempts to impress Waugh with her intimacy with Dominica and its people. It is hard to know if the letter itself is fiction, whether the woman with the mule was "kind," as Rhys tells Waugh, or hostile, as she writes in "The Imperial Road." She says to Waugh that she and her husband completed the hike along the Imperial Road all the way to Roseau, their journey concluding with a feeling of triumph—certainly opposite to the sense of loss and consternation with which Rhys's story closes. But in both letter and story

Rhys is consistent in clinging to the existence of the road—despite Waugh's specific explanation as to why it is no longer there.

Almost thirty years after her letter to Waugh, in her posthumously published autobiography, *Smile Please*, Rhys again insists that the Imperial Road was successfully completed. In the chapter "Zouaves" she writes about Mr. Hesketh (a slight change of the name Hasketh Bell in her letter to Waugh):

He improved the roads out of all knowledge and triumphantly carried through his better idea of an Imperial Road across the island so that the Caribbean and south Atlantic sides were no longer cut off one from the other.⁷

Rhys was sixteen when she left Dominica, forty-six when she returned there in 1936, about sixty when she wrote to Waugh, and almost ninety when she worked on her autobiography. For over half a century the Imperial Road remained an emblem for her: her encounter with its "non-existence" on her only return to Dominica and her later obsession with its "disappearance" point to its having special significance for her. Specifically, it was a "fact," a concrete particular whose continuing existence could, in some ways, verify the myths of her childhood. It is a still point whose existence keeps "home" intact and which becomes a referent.

Furthermore, the Imperial Road—not only in its name—is clearly a colonial thoroughfare, one whose very opening Rhys recalls as accompanied by all the pomp and circumstance, all the ceremonial paraphernalia, of the already declining British colonial presence in Dominica. Its eventual failure as an enterprise, according to Waugh, was due not only to the inefficiency of Dominican economics but to the power of the landscape, the implacable natural force of Dominica—a force which Rhys has often, in her other work, associated with the blacks of the island and about whom she expresses the same mixture of feelings that she ascribes to the island itself. The Imperial Road is, at the least, a metaphor for colonialism, its disappearance signifying the end and failure of colonialism; but the denial of its ever having existed is, for Rhys's narrator in "The Imperial Road" a denial of the past, a denial that strips her of identity.

In "The Imperial Road," Rhys re-explores the loss of home, the loss even of her colonial identity except as it is seen in the hatred she imagines the blacks hold toward her. And though that hostility may or may not have been imagined, the anger that Rhys's narrator feels from the blacks mirrors the narrator's own anger, an anger at the loss of home expressed, in this story, as a racism projected onto the black characters.

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Athill's assessment that Rhys "had lost her grip on her style" in "The Imperial Road," for the most part, is true. Yet the story remains interesting—especially when compared to the Waugh letter and the chapter in *Smile Please*—in terms of what it tells us about how Rhys worked with fact and fiction; about her conflicted attitudes toward people of color; and about how the experience of colonialism affected her throughout her life. When we recall Rhys's other published and unpublished comments about West Indians of African descent, remarks that describe them as the most enviable of people, the most sympathetic, or the most courageous, and a group to which she yearned to belong, we see in "The Imperial Road" a different facet of her relation to them.⁸

The publishing history of "The Imperial Road" raises an important question about the relationship between writer and publisher: whether material containing objectionable social attitudes and vocabulary should be denied publication. While Rhys's story is not fully developed, neither are many of the stories that appear in *Sleep It Off, Lady*, the collection from which this piece was omitted. One wonders if, at least in part, Rhys was correct when she said that the story was rejected because of its "anti-negro" tone.

If one judges from Theroux's letter in which he refers to "the reasons" why the story was not published, it seems that some literary people—Theroux at least—shared Rhys's perception. Certainly Theroux's story "Zombies" is in part about censorship and about the relationship between writers and their publishers. It and "The Imperial Ice House" serve as a kind of retribution for Rhys or, more universally, for "the writer." Not only does "Zombies" publicize the publishing history of "the icehouse story," but the appearance of the story itself following "Zombies" allows, at least in fiction, for Theroux to act as publisher, for the writer to triumph over the monitor. As a writer he "publishes" the unpublishable story written by Miss Bristow.

"The Imperial Ice House," as Miss Bristow says to the publisher's representative, Philippa, "is not about race. It is about condition" (38): it is, like so much of Theroux's fiction, concerned with colonialism and its effects both on white colonialists and on the native populations they colonize. Rhys's story too is about colonialism—and about exile. For the exile the very notion of home begins to suggest homelessness and continual exile. Home itself becomes a triple image: as it may have been when first experienced; as it might have become through time passing; and as it exists through the inevitable distortion posed by memory. Ultimately, home "disappears."

It is hard, finally, to ignore the word "disappearance," so important in "The Imperial Road" and central to all the biographical accounts of Rhys's life: her "disappearance" from the public eye; the inability of admirers to locate her; the disappearance of her books from the public domain and, reflectively, her "rediscovery"—the location of the person Jean Rhys and her subsequent re-emergence as a writer. "The Imperial Road" is about identity. For Rhys too, the rejection of "The Imperial Road" must have signified, as it seems to have for Theroux, the relationship of the writer to the world, a relationship that can exist—for better or for worse—only through the facilitation of the publisher and the response of the public.

NOTES

¹ A minor episode was subsequently expanded by Rhys and published in *Sleep It Off, Lady* as "The Bishop's Feast."

² I discuss elsewhere (224 n. 3) David Plante's mixture of reporting and literary representation of Rhys in his *Difficult Women*.

³ As Kappers-den Hollander has pointed out, Rhys and her first husband, Jean Lenglet, had a writing partnership that involved not only their using each other as the basis for a character in a novel but their borrowing from and adapting each other's writing, he in Dutch, she in English.

⁴ The conclusions in this article are my own and do not represent a collaboration with Paul Theroux.

⁵ For example, early in the manuscript the narrator, referring to her husband says, "My husband (who I will call Lee) . . ."

⁶ This letter was discovered by Elaine Campbell, the text of which appears in her article. Campbell's short piece is essentially a presentation of Rhys's letter and a description of the circumstances surrounding the brief correspondence between Waugh and Rhys.

⁷ Interestingly, Mr. Hesketh also becomes one of those older male figures whom the adolescent Rhys imbues with a quality of forbidden sexuality.

⁸ See especially Rhys's unpublished *Black Exercise Book* in the McFarlin Library, Plante, and O'Connor.

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Exploring *The Changing Light at Sandover*: An Interview with James Merrill

C. A. BUCKLEY

The visionary epic suggests an extensive work expressing sublime "revelations," in high artistic style and language. The mode is rare nowadays. Yet given its centrality in the tradition of great poetry (Dante, Milton, Blake), it is heartening to find someone ambitious enough to attempt a contemporary work in the genre. The work in question is *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York; Atheneum, 1982), a 560-page poem by Pulitzer prize-winning poet James Merrill. The poem charts communications with "spirits" over a twenty-five-year period, even as it tells the story of the poet's life during that time. Its other-worldly protagonists offer revisionary readings of material from such diverse sources as the Bible and Blavatsky, integrating such material with modern (especially scientific) knowledge and the poet's personal life.

I undertook this interview with the purpose of clarifying some of the more difficult aspects of the epic trilogy. First I sought clarification in exploration of the poem's background and mode of composition. Second, since the poem partly challenges the largely Christian perspective of visionary epic since the Middle Ages, a perspective I share, I thought that another mode of clarification might be to explore the ideological divide between Merrill's "new age" doctrines and mainstream Christian beliefs and values. This also enabled me to pursue the question whether the trilogy trivializes the "Great Tradition"—Genesis, Milton, Dante—by revising it in line with "modern knowledge" and the occult, a question the poet himself addresses, with

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some anguish, early in *Mirabell* (CLS 136). So the interview progresses from discussion of the poem's background and composition to a skeptical exploration of its esoteric doctrines.

The interview took place in the poet's home in Stonington, Connecticut. Here Merrill and David Jackson, his partner at the ouija board, received many of the "revelations" that underpin the poem. Indeed, the ensuing dialogue took place in the very "stardeck" or attic room mentioned in *Ephraim*.

CB: Let's begin with 1946, and an incident referred to in your poem "A Tenancy." You make a pact with the "Source of Light"; you seem to commit yourself to some visionary project.

JM: Well no. It was nothing that grand. What had happened by 1946 was that I had been, for several months in the Army, perhaps been in more physical danger than I had ever been in my life. I had begun to understand some of the implications of Hiroshima, what another war might mean. I was frightened, and I wanted time to do what I had to do on earth, and I think what I was bargaining for was simply a fairly unbroken time without too many outside disturbances.

CB: One thing you wanted to pursue without such disturbance, of course, was your writing career. Did you have any difficulty, at that early stage, in getting your work published?

JM: No, I don't think so. Of course poets have multiplied according to a geometric progression. Every generation there are more of us. There were many fewer poets—there were fewer periodicals too—in 1945. But by and large the poems that got sent out were taken. Where I felt more at a loss was during the years after *First Poems* appeared. It had by then come to me that I had really nothing to do except to write, and a kind of stage fright took over. Could I devote that many waking hours to being a poet? So I wasted a great deal of time trying to make the transition from school discipline, where you were told what to write and when to hand it in, to the discipline which you imposed upon yourself. How much time you gave to distraction. How that fitted together with your working time.

CB: About 1953 you certainly seem to undergo some sort of writer's block; "The Mirror" hints at a temporary failure of inspiration.

JM: Maybe I had begun to feel that the individual consciousness was not all that reliable, or was not the final court of appeal, and was a rather flimsy perishable affair.

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CB: In *The Seraglio* Francis suffers serious psychological disturbance prior to ouija-board experiments; he attempts suicidal emasculation. Does that reflect other aspects of your own experiences at the time?

JM: Well, I was in one sense afraid of money. I was afraid of what money might do to me. I was still a young relatively unformed person. I was also afraid of sex; I was afraid of what sex might do to me. That I might lose myself in simply being rich, and by the same token lose myself in sexuality. And so Francis in *The Seraglio* tries first of all to get rid of his money, and fails, and secondly emasculates himself and gets the sexual problem out of the way. Now there is no hint that he is anything of an author, but I think that his behavior symbolically dramatized a very grotesque solution to the problems I was facing.

CB: Were the seances a way of dealing with these complexes? Later in the novel Francis seems to treat the spiritualist experiment in a more lighthearted way.

JM: Certainly by the end of the book he's more or less dismissed it as a parlor game. Which we did too, after the first couple of summers. People would come up for the weekend and we'd say: "Ah, try this, it's fun, you can ask who your patron is!"

CB: Yet you claim that because of it your life became more "real."

JM: Those were the first months of it, when we did it every day.

CB: In *The Seraglio* Francis also believes totally in it at first.

JM: He was very excited originally. And then it settled down. It dawned on us that we hadn't been put on earth to spend hours every day in conversation with another world which could be imaginary, which could be a projection of our own neuroses. To feel this at thirty I thought was a very healthy feeling. To feel it again at fifty . . . By then perhaps you have room for this otherworldly dimension.

CB: Was that when you began to take it seriously again?

JM: I give an account of that in *Sandover*. I'd finished writing *The Book of Ephraim* and then this sort of overkill began. The bats took over, and we were frightened and awed all over again, as we had been twenty years before. But since we were twenty years older we thought: "Why not give it a try? If life is no longer full of youthful pleasures and distractions, let's see what reaches us from this quarter."

CB: Was the project, to some extent, an expression of repressed guilt?

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JM: Well, I expect so.

CB: The I section of *Ephraim* mentions childlessness as one possible generative complex behind the spirit "illusions." Was there pressure on you from your parents for children?

JM: Not just my parents. I think there's a kind of genetic imperative we all feel. Even happily married couples who decide not to have children have a terribly hard time to go through. With me it didn't clear away. I never had a mother in mind for a child, but by my mid-thirties I was still thinking if I am going to be a father now is the time to do something about it.

CB: *Sandover* hints that the poem may be a kind of surrogate child.

JM: There's that aspect to anything you do that's creative.

CB: It's a substitute for procreative fulfillment.

JM: It transforms it to a virtual sphere, a metaphorical sphere.

CB: Your friends and relations also undergo metaphorical metamorphosis in *Sandover*. Could you fill us in on some of them, such as Hans?

JM: He's a very well known figure in Dutch literature. Hans Lodeizen. He's practically the Apollinaire of Holland. He invented an easy half-surrealist idiom. He's read mostly I think by teen-agers. I couldn't read Dutch; before he died he improvised some translations for me. Now David and I felt no great kinship with the kind of work he was doing, but he was my first European friend.

CB: You did a lot of traveling abroad during the fifties and sixties?

JM: We were footloose [chuckle], yes.

CB: Did you continue with the ouija board during these journeys?

JM: When we took that trip [to Europe and Asia], yes. Often we were tired, and left to ourselves at the end of the day, and almost too filled with impressions to talk or to read. But we would pull out the ouija board.

CB: In Greece you met Maria Mitsotáki. Did she join in these seances?

JM: No, no, no. I'm not sure she even knew that we held them. We were very close to her in affection, but I don't think we talked about this.

CB: You began the trilogy in the seventies. The lyric "The Will" seems

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to contain an initial commitment to that underworld project. Did you consciously feel you were giving up your own will in order to submit it to the visionary forces?

JM: No, no! In my position, with the kind of estate I have to leave in some sort of order, I must have made fourteen or fifteen wills in my life. So it's something I do every two or three years at the insistence of a lawyer. It happened to be a way of getting into that poem. It's no accident perhaps that I picked it for the first time to write about on the eve of that experience [beginning *Sandover*]. "The Will" leads you, with some very minor stretch of the imagination, into a posthumous world. But the ibis which used to sit in this room, and the loss of the manuscript—those details are real.

CB: But did that loss not symbolize a change in your approach to the visionary material?

JM: Oh, I don't think it symbolizes, I think it describes it. I was really very shocked by the loss of that manuscript and the bag with the bird in it. There was no place in "The Will" for what happened six or seven months later, but I'd kept work sheets of that ill-starred novel and was bringing them home from Athens when I forgot them in a hotel in Germany. So I really subconsciously took pains to strip myself of this false beginning. I knew that I wanted to write about our experiences with the spirits.

CB: Was the "lost novel" also about those experiences then?

JM: Yes. We have Joanna bringing the ouija board. It was partly invented, you know; it was fleshed out with characters. But in—I think it's section J of *Ephraim*, she's flying toward New Mexico to visit Old Matt and Lucy, and she's bringing them a ouija board.

CB: Ten years before, you wrote *The (Diblos) Notebook*. Does *Sandover* owe any of its formal intricacies to your experiments with the novel?

JM: With *The (Diblos) Notebook* my sense of the form almost preceded my writing of the novel. With *Sandover*, it struck me that the poem evolved its form. The alphabet was a perfectly natural idea, but I didn't think of it right away. It took me a long time to figure it out, for these structural aids to reach me.

CB: *Sandover* is presented in more personal terms than your novels.

JM: For one thing, it had to be done in the first person. . . . When people say what a wonderful device to use the ouija board, I say, "I

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don't care whether you believe the revelations as long as you believe that we had the experience." Of course that wouldn't have been the case in the novel, that would be the first thing you wouldn't necessarily believe. But I really went to great pains in the poem to make a reader feel that this happened, wherever the messages came from.

CB: Did the total scheme of the poem evolve naturally?

JM: It evolved first of all literally from the materials, from the board we sat at every day. There was the alphabet, there were the numbers, there was the "yes" and the "no" and the ampersand—that whole diagram—so that the materials of the structure were before us, day after day.

CB: Yet *Ephraim* is more autobiographical than the other books.

JM: It's written in a style that's much more my own voice. It's me telling this with a few salient quotes, by and large. It's me telling it also from the perspective of twenty years, so that it's already composed in my imagination. I emphasize what I remember there, the points I remember best, the points I want to make. It's at a whole distance from me. But the other two were put together with my nose to the page. I mean day after day we didn't know what was coming next. So they're distinctly different techniques. Even though throughout the other two volumes there are passages that are in the manner of *Ephraim*, where I stand back a little bit. But as I said in *Mirabell*, I couldn't wait twenty years for that material to compose itself.

CB: Then circumstances dictated *Mirabell's* more immediate reportorial style.

JM: I couldn't wait until everything fitted into perspective to write the *Mirabell* book. I mean it took me twenty years to see the material of *Ephraim* at that distance, years in which I had been very careful not to write about it, certainly not to use it in poetry. Then it dawned on me that it did have a story to tell. Of course I thought *Ephraim* was self-contained, nothing more would follow.

CB: In later books did you also radically revise what the "spirits" dictated?

JM: No, it was worked up a little bit in the writing. I mean what I did with the transcripts was: we would finish each day and then David and I would read it over again and say, "Now what question did we ask here to produce this answer?" because there was never time to do more than

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indicate very quickly the subject of a question, and sometimes they were phrased at a certain length. So we'd reconstruct that. Then I would type up the questions and answers, and then I would carry this around with me, and with a magic marker I would emphasize the parts that seemed indispensable to the poem. So in that way I managed to cut the *Mirabell* material probably by at least half, and maybe more. In *Scripts* the lessons were so formal that I didn't cut any of those, and did next to no editing.

CB: What about your additions and commentaries?

JM: Those came to me as I relived the moments. I kept reading our transcripts again and again to try and dramatize the original give-and-take. I suppose very often I hit upon exactly the right question we'd asked. I must have done to make the answer coherent.

CB: Relating the poem to its contexts, you, or "spirits," echo themes notable in the sixties—spiritualism, ecology, fear of nuclear war.

JM: Well, as I say, I knew about Hiroshima fifteen years before the sixties. Maybe unconsciously I let myself drift a little bit with the prevailing current, but it never seemed to me that I wanted to adopt the fashions in thought or subject matter of the different decades I've gone through.

CB: Surely "Roger Clay's Proposal" is very much a poem of its period.

JM: That poem was written when I was yet again very scared. It dates from the so-called Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy stood up to Khrushchev, or whoever it was. Actually, I hate writing political lyrics because so little of the whole personality gets involved in them. I do get carried away. I don't refuse to write them, but the shorter they are the better.

CB: You do believe we must stop this move toward nuclear holocaust.

JM: Well, I do believe that, but, however, not in the way that most people seem to. I think it's more important to save the environment than it is to save large sections of the population. It seems to me that there have always been mass exterminations. I would like very much to think that our species might survive, and modify itself, but without a clean ocean, and without sufficient oxygen, it may be impossible. The earth is sacred; the elements are the sacred things, not their namers and exploiters.

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CB: The spirits demand "poems of science" and you are given a mission to save "The Greenhouse," the ecological system atomic weapons threaten. Is that why the poem is partially a "history of the bomb"?

JM: That's very interesting. Yes, I hadn't thought of it that way, but "they" do tell their myth about the great plain of China, and a nuclear holocaust in prehistory, whatever that means.

CB: You hint that moves toward a similar modern apocalypse began in 1934, with nuclear fission.

JM: Well, that extraordinary thing Einstein said, which I use in the epigraph, about the first energy not to come from the sun, and how we will see that at work—yes, that's when the great danger began. I mean there were all kinds of chemical poisons in existence, but nothing so strapped to the whole of matter.

CB: Demanding "poems of science," your "spirits" say the structures needed to build paradise are molecular. Isn't it naive to say, because the atom exists everything develops toward paradise?

JM: Well, wait a minute! The atom is only the building block of the molecules as I understand. So that until molecules were formed there was no possibility of structure and no possibility of higher forms of life beyond the atom. Now I know that there were atoms of varying complexities, but its just as if you had the letter A in italic, in Gothic, in capital, and when molecules happened, then you could make a whole word out of it. Or is that too simplistic?

CB: The poem sees God B, our world's deity, "falling" from a space "Pantheon"; an "ancient and immortal intelligence," yet he originated with the first living cell. That seems contradictory.

JM: Well, I think that biology has become an ancient and immortal intelligence. To me the main point is this accumulative intelligence. God is defined as the knowledge in all those cells since the first cell. So God keeps growing. With this view one can see God is a changing force, and ever more complex.

CB: Would you see yourself then as a pantheist?

JM: Would that mean that God is all of us?

CB: That God is in everything and is the sum total of everything.

JM: Yes, yes.

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CB: You talk about mind as well and the development of soul. Surely there is some element other than the biological involved there?

JM: Well there must, there must be. I haven't formulated it, except as it might appear in the poem. We could look up Mind in the index. I always have to do that to refresh myself about specific items. Stephen Yenser has a chapter on *Mirabell* called "The Mind of Nature," and the first sentence is "Or do I mean the nature of mind?" No, these opposites are really just two sides of the same coin, a single thing. It's for dramatic purposes, I think, you put them at odds. But it seems to me that the effects of, the products of, human intelligence, are almost biological functions, you know, like the urine of the dog that's full of information for other dogs. There is an almost excremental, in the most innocent and noble sense, aspect to what we do, to our "droppings."

CB: Yet the poem celebrates intellectual heroes like Einstein, and downgrades the masses. How do you condone such elitism?

JM: People ask me a lot about that when I go to a campus, and I try to point out that first of all it's not me saying those things, but by and large it's *Mirabell*, who isn't a human character. One thing clear in the poem is that God loves his creation, and that whether you're intelligent and productive or hapless and drunk all day long, the spark of God that is in you, he recognizes, or she recognizes. In God's eyes you are as valuable as any other piece of creation on earth. On the other hand, once God's celestial suspension of discrimination is set aside, a lesser mind (than his or hers), is apt to think in terms of relative value, capability, a whole hierarchy of talents and powers. A lesser mind than God's is forced to admit that most people, through the ill-fortune of their birth or education, don't fill their role in the world.

CB: *Braving the Elements* sets man in relation to the elements. Is that also the epic's theme?

JM: Well . . . yes. . . . The elements we relate to in *Braving the Elements* are pretty much earth, fire, and water; but there are other elements, in the crucibles of *Sandover's* lab where personality is formed, according to the myth. These are what they call, mistakenly I think, "cloning." It all seems to be beyond matter or chemistry. We take Stravinsky powder and a teaspoon of Mozart to make a composer for the next millennium.

CB: This idea of "cloning" seems very inhuman. . . .

JM: Well, it does . . .

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CB: . . . God's agents manufacturing monsters in a sort of heavenly lab, manipulating nature to gain a short cut on evolution. That idea is suggested.

JM: It's suggested, but I take it as almost metaphorical. There would be no other way to talk about these kinds of changes and effects. I mean it's probably a necessary fiction for this system to be felt in its entirety. I've often felt something like that "cloning" in my own life. What if somebody had not told me to read Proust? The act of sitting there reading; I mean it was as if my mind was being permanently changed and tampered with.

CB: It's more a sort of a cultural process then.

JM: Well, in that instance it would be, but in Mirabell's view of things it could be the instillation of certain moral virtues, weaknesses of character, physical strengths and weaknesses, Robert Morse's club foot, things like that.

CB: In "Lost in Translation" you seem to look for a key that will unlock the cosmic puzzle. To what extent is *Sandover* a similar effort to find the key to everything, and is the atom that key?

JM: No, that doesn't really make me jump up and down as a description of *Sandover*, or "Lost in Translation." I mean, yes, a lot seems to narrow backward to a piece of the puzzle, but remember that point in *Sandover* when we ask if Unice is simply a personification of a certain formula, if he stands for the stable force in nature; and Auden says in effect, "What a boring idea to sweep away all the wonderful things, the grasslands, the whole world that has been projected from this abstraction, simply in order to return to it." I think this is why I don't embrace your notion. I've never started with an abstraction. I mean if there was an abstraction buried in the profusion, the profusion had become by then, to me at least, more valuable.

CB: Perhaps that also explains the poem's mix of sublime and mundane material.

JM: Well, these are all parts of the case, circumstantial things. I don't necessarily believe at all in a progress toward grandeur and sublimity, because it seems to me that we have instant access to it. As Michael says, all that protocol Mirabell wants before we meet the angels is perfect nonsense! I mean man has made the imaginative leap onto the palm of Michael for generations, for millennia. I get confirmation of that in the

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great variety of diction in Dante—you know, that vulgar language side by side with the sublime.

CB: Dante's work is a comedy. Did you consciously imitate him in that?

JM: No, I think it came naturally to me. It's part of my temperament.

CB: Speaking of tradition, you refer a lot to Plato, Plotinus, and Pythagoras. Did you deliberately bring classical material into the poem?

JM: I didn't deliberately bring in anything. I studied for the science in the poem, as much as a fifty-year-old man can take in of a whole body of terms that he'd always scorned and avoided before that. But I didn't read any Plato. I read Plato somewhat as an undergraduate, never Plotinus, never Pythagoras, (who) was a mythical figure to me.

CB: Yet the "Samos" section of *Sandover* features Pythagoras's view that "all things are numbers."

JM: Yes, and *Mirabell's* lessons show this; his cohorts held our noses to the grindstone of number.

CB: You mean everything is structured in terms of chemical formulas?

JM: Yes. And those crazy connections he makes between numbers and the letters of the alphabet are really the cheapest newspaper kind of numerology.

CB: Why do the spirits attribute special significance to certain numbers—five, twelve, and four?

JM: I don't really understand, I took that as part of the given lessons. To me where it came alive, partly through their drilling into us about the five and the twelve, and Pythagoras of course, is that lyric titled "Samos." Do you know where that form comes from? Its one of Dante's canzones. Auden, I think, is the first person since Dante to use it. He has a poem called "Canzone," by which of course Dante meant any kind of strophic form, but Auden uses it, varying it slightly. His envoi is of five lines rather than six. Before that you have five twelve-line stanzas with five end words. The numerology involved was so ingrained in the poem that I really felt that while I was writing it, I was almost justifying all those tedious lectures we'd had on the subject.

CB: Since you refer to Dante, how does your other-world structure relate to his system of hell, purgatory, heaven? It seems you don't make such distinctions.

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JM: No.

CB: But you do talk of "hells" within each person?

JM: Yes. It's probably a more Protestant view of things, and intermittent. I mean a hell would be in you for the length of time that your thought tortured you.

CB: Do people's actions in the world help shape their other-worldly existence, in your scheme?

JM: I don't think so. Well, except in the dramatic cases of Caligula and Hitler. I think, you know, rebirth takes care of that. Not that it sounds particularly like the Hindu Karma. I don't think you're paying in one life for what you've done in the previous one.

CB: But you seem to hint that if a person lives, we'll say, a "bad" life in one existence, he will be re-programmed in heaven and born down the ladder in the next life?

JM: I had the impression that things kept getting better in the sense that every life purges you to some degree of your "animal densities." They need a ratio of one to twenty-thousand, Mirabell says somewhere, and with each life your human densities increase, and according to Mirabell, though I should think the question might be ambiguous, that is an advantage.

CB: So the sort of life a person leads doesn't make any difference?

JM: No, I think it does, but, except in a rare case like Hitler, it doesn't make you less fit for rebirth. As long as you are reborn you have a chance to conform a little bit to God's plan.

CB: The souls of Hitler and Caligula are suspended between lives, in a state like Dante's Limbo?

JM: Its much more Dante's final circle in hell, the souls packed in ice. You see, since Dante doesn't touch on reincarnation at all, the systems are conspicuously unlike. But Hitler and Caligula would be the very rare cases of soul-material made unavailable to any further life on earth.

CB: You envisage nine characteristics of God. The final one is mysterious?

JM: Yes, Michael says, "The Zeroeth we do not know. This he utters outward."

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CB: You think there's always a mysterious element about the Deity?

JM: The odd thing is that in the fiction of the poem we hear the song, along with Maria and Auden, but the angels don't, which may be [chuckle] human chauvinism on the part of the poet. There's a good deal about God that the angels don't know on their own, judging from what they say.

CB: Do the nine stages each person has to rise through in heaven involve participation in each of these nine characteristics of God?

JM: Oh, that's in the bureaucracy. Those stages would be only analogous to God's. There again you might think of Dante because there are nine levels in the *Inferno*, nine in the *Purgatorio*, and the nine spheres of *Paradiso*. And then there's that whirling point of light beyond the nine spheres, which Beatrice says is the point from which all nature depends.

CB: And you take that as the center of the atom?

JM: By analogy, yes. I picked the Niels Bohr model as being the most conveniently similar to Dante.

CB: You used Bohr's concept of complementarity as well.

JM: Also, his model for the atom, with its electrons, looks like a miniature solar system. I'm afraid subsequent models for the atom don't resemble the sun and its planets so much as Bohr's did.

CB: God then is this center of everything in the world.

JM: It's a very fluid center, A. R. Ammons has a lovely line somewhere; he says, "Reality is all abob with centers."

CB: It's a very old mystic concept. Julian of Norwich said, "Suddenly I saw God in a point." Were you conscious of that whole tradition?

JM: What I had more in my conscious mind was that point in Dante's *Paradiso*.

CB: There is a suggestion in the "Yes" and "No" sections of *Scripts* that nowadays things are becoming decentered, that, in the Yeatsian sense, the center can no longer "hold."

JM: Ah, that last speech after the lessons in "No," where they talk about the "wisps of smoke," the "monitor" getting to be felt; you know, the things they couldn't control, and "accidents" happening after a whole

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poem in which they've been saying that there's no accident. Yes, that seems to be their version of the Yeats poem.

CB: There are Miltonic elements in *Sandover*. Am I correct in saying that you treat "the Fall" theme in less transcendental or moral terms?

JM: There's a point where Auden talks about God's coming to earth as a fall from the Pantheon, the "great fall." Was he a kind of stealer of fire? Was God really closer to Prometheus, with his partiality for the human race?

CB: Do you envisage life evolving back to some original perfection?

JM: It may be evolving. I don't know. If things move in a spiral, maybe it's evolving to something similar to the perfection, but another higher stage of the perfection. It's hard to say. These are questions that the poem does no more than graze. And I was sufficiently dumbfounded through most of the transcripts that these things didn't occur to me to ask. It was already very unwieldy material.

CB: It seems to me that for the spirits the objective of the evolutionary process is a natural paradise, a secular utopia. Is that pure fantasy? Do you think there can be a paradise on earth?

JM: It seems to me that we have creatures on earth already that would be perfectly at home in paradise, like the porpoises. And through them I think we get some kind of glimmering of a creation without flaw. Even if they fitted into a system of natural enmity, still it would involve a clean "ecological" kind of killing.

CB: And the cosmic plan is geared to achieving such a natural Eden?

JM: Well, toward the end of *Scripts*, when we have that little session called "glimpses of the future," there is kind of science-fiction cartoon of a different kind of human being.

CB: Does this mean that man may become extinct?

JM: That's what the poem seems to be saying, and while it says it so briefly that, as I say, it doesn't strike me as more than a few frames from a comic strip, I don't see what's impossible about it. I mean when you think what man was forty years ago, or a hundred thousand years ago, we have changed quite a bit.

CB: Evolution then involves fall/redemption cycles, each one moving further toward perfection.

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JM: Each fall meaning each cataclysm?

CB: Each apocalyptic cataclysm, each leap in the evolution of species.

JM: It does seem that way, yes.

CB: How does that compare with Yeats's system? Yeats sees alternating cycles of chaos and progress. Do you envisage such cycles as part of a cumulative process, evolutionary progression?

JM: I would think so, I mean as long as we accept the definition of God as an accumulative intelligence. You know, I half expect when there's a cataclysm and one creature is wiped out, that God is brainwashed accordingly, diminished by the experience of that creature.

CB: How seriously do you take the poem's image of you as a modern religious prophet?

JM: Oh, not seriously at all. I suppose it's because I live in this particular country, this civilization, where very little attention is paid to poetry by and large. Now if I were a Russian poet and published this book and [chuckle] five hundred thousand people had read it, maybe I would give myself greater airs, but if my instructors wanted to publicize what was coming, they ought to have picked Robert Ludlum instead of me.

CB: Yet you call yourself the scribe, compare yourself to the biblical writer who looked into the heart of "the atom" and wrote "in the beginning was the word."

JM: Oh, the author of Genesis heard these vibrations. Again we were talking more about the necessities of revising truth, and bringing it up to date. You know, taking into account all the changes in the human psyche and the world.

CB: In your vision of historical change, you see the last three millennia as a key to the future.

JM: Yes. Starting with Akhnaton.

CB: You seem to envisage great religious leaders—Christ, Buddha, Mohammed—as crucial to this development, and yet you hint that at present we may be moving past their era?

JM: The poem gives credit to the followers of Mohammed for really living by their faith, and not only living but letting their faith dictate foreign policy. I'm sure a lot of private individuals are living Christian lives in the West, but most of their countries' foreign policies would be

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of course dictated by capitalism or communism. There has been a kind of split. It wasn't always the case. One had the crusades, and Marx would say that this was thinly disguised economic expansion, but most people then believed that the Christian policy of the king lay behind it all, whereas nobody for a minute thinks there's anything but capitalism and communism at stake in Nicaragua.

CB: Isn't there a revival in Christianity?

JM: Let's just wait and see how effective it is, whether it still can accomplish something. I mean the Mohammedan faith keeps accomplishing things. One senses a relative debility in Christ and Buddha, compared to Islam.

CB: A lot of the logic of *Sandover* stems from the view that present trends must continue. Surely history shows that trends are very fickle.

JM: What trends did you have in mind?

CB: For example this dominance of science in the modern world, and an ideology based on . . .

JM: Technology?

CB: Technology also. Many people think that technology, as now developing, is a two-headed monster; it has created more problems than it has solved.

JM: Oh, *Sandover* talks about the reversal of that trend. I mean it talks about using surface fuels like wind and water and solar energy. All of that would require a certain amount of technology but . . . It would be lopping off that other head of the monster.

CB: Isn't there also a criticism of destructive aspects of science?

JM: Well, a kind of censorship is exercised. The "powers" pluck back scientists too close to a discovery whose time hasn't come. George Cotzias had been working on a gene to prolong life, to double the life span. They [the spirits] called him back. Would mankind be able to handle that long a life? Given our education facilities and so forth, no.

CB: One thing that worries me about the poem is that it seems to reduce the very powerful moral and spiritual tradition of Western epics in the biblical tradition, to liberal secular ideology.

JM: You're talking with labels that to me don't have very much meaning.

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CB: By secular I mean that a lot of traditional transcendent ideas, as from Genesis, are reduced to material terms. For example, Abel is reinterpreted as the positive force within the atom. By liberal I mean that traditional moral positions are completely eliminated. A person lives as he is and is reborn and so on. The closest you come to defining any moral position is when you say that person has a duty to serve the "Greenhouse."

JM: Wait a minute, wait a minute. You remember what Gabriel defines sin as? It's the "giving and the receiving of pain." The more I think about it, that covers pretty much the deadly sins. I mean did you think about that a bit. Pain given, pain received. I mean the taking of offense is often a wicked and self-indulgent thing; it's pride that takes offense. For people to live by some such definition would be a great deal to ask in these days. As for the secularization, you've spoken already about how science is finding God within the atom. But I wouldn't talk about reducing Genesis to an atomic paradigm, as secular in the context of this poem, as a secularization at all. I think what it does is bring new possibilities and new notions to what has withered into a lot of fundamentalist clichés. How do you refurbish something as wonderful as Genesis? One way is to say these weren't people so much as metaphor. Cain and Abel are forces within matter, serious forces that correspond to the ambiguities within God and nature. And if you call that secular I can't agree.

CB: But surely *Sandover's* spirits see no force outside of the world as it is, and man as he is.

JM: Well you have the Lab, where the angels, and the fallen angels tamed to obedience, are working as hard as they can to elevate and change and bring about a kind of man that will save the "Greenhouse."

CB: Aren't these just natural elements? At one stage you say the "supernatural does not exist."

JM: Perhaps the point is that the natural extends over a much vaster sphere than we would have thought. We made the distinction between natural and supernatural. If you agree that God is within us and that we are natural, think how vast nature is, both vertically and with circumferences everywhere,

CB: If one accepts that there is "evil" or imperfection in the world, isn't it naive to say things will develop "naturally" toward a paradise?

JM: Well, if we have somewhat expanded the meaning of natural in our

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exchange five minutes ago, I would agree with it. If nature includes these "supernatural" forces, if nature has access to them and they to nature.

CB: But do you not reduce good and evil to simple positive and negative forces within the atom?

JM: I don't think that those positive and negative forces correspond to good and evil necessarily. I think my line in the poem is "Good and evil let my reader say." I think that there are countless oppositions in the poem. Take the contrast between Mirabell and the Unicorn, which Auden suggests is analogous to the stable and unstable particles. I mean are those particles to be described as "good" or "evil"? If so, why? These are the ambiguities out of which the whole universe is constructed.

CB: At one stage you say that good and evil are the same.

JM: It's phrased as a question, I believe.

CB: Of course, but you do discuss a "twin black paradise," as if two Gods existed.

JM: I'm talking about anti-matter, which again I wouldn't presume to call evil. Primarily, I think it's more a mirror-image, you know, almost unimaginable.

CB: And it exists of course, as modern science has proven.

JM: And have you read any of the papers? People are suddenly writing a lot about "chaos." Have you picked up on that at all? I mean they graph "chaos" like the completely irregular dripping of a faucet, which doesn't recur, and yet on the graph it makes a wondrous pattern. It seems to me that this is the secret of "Queen Mum" in the poem. These are things she knows, and no matter how terrible her mask as chaos, her punitive mask, it may be that it's some kind of orderly vision, which we would foolishly call chaos, behind it.

CB: Is your argument that "evil," imperfection or chaos, is a necessary corollary of "good"?

JM: Well I'm not at all at home with the terms good and evil. There are plenty of examples in the poem when JM's mind is threatened by fear, and his mineral densities shine their torch into the ring of approaching beasts. The "Monitor," for instance, is indeed a very ambiguous and scary figure. Wystan, I think, said in the transcripts, not in the poem, that he pictured the "Monitor" as the poem's version of Satan. I have a

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line or two about a figure punishing tiny manikins for their sins. At least as far as the poem is concerned, the "Monitor" is contained, we hold it back. Now again there's a funny ambiguity. At first one hears the black hands pressing against the panes, the outermost panes of the "Greenhouse," but then you have a feeling that the "Monitor" is raging at the center of the earth as well. And the whole series of questions about where did the "germ" come from: was it in the "sand" that dusted the contract, the charter that God received from his brothers in the Pantheon? I mean there are all kind of speculations about the origin, the source. I wouldn't necessarily call it evil so much as a kind of subversiveness or imperfection, a miscalculation even, within the system. But who's to say who made the original calculation?

CB: You seem to see death as necessary in this largely amoral cosmos.

JM: If you believe in reincarnation, then death, of course, is not as dramatic as it would be in another poem where a final judgment (or perhaps worse, no judgment at all) would be passed upon you.

CB: Is this why you posit time as a positive force—it brings death but also creative renewal?

JM: Well, it's indispensable to human life. The spirits don't seem to know much about it; Mirabell sees it as vaguely the space of a certain number of years. But they can make adjustments in what we would call the future, to some degree. . . . I mean they don't have unlimited power. He [Mirabell] speaks of time as more of an animal trait. And the angels, I think, use it as a kind of literary convention.

CB: Would you say then that time is a human illusion?

JM: I don't think it's a human illusion, because in time, and perhaps even in our time, the "Greenhouse" can be, if not destroyed, horribly mutilated. There's that point about illusion; who was it, was it Dr. Johnson, who kicked the rock to disprove Berkeley?

CB: You talk about this vast pool into which everyone eventually drops.

JM: Well that's their view of paradise. That's heaven on earth. Nothing will be lost but we will be two drops in the great waterfall.

CB: So that everyone has a place within a larger pattern.

JM: Yes. And I suppose the comfort, such as it is, is not of the individual soul being part of a sweet society in paradise, but the sense of

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being recycled. Not to be used in paradise is the only hell; not to be used as part of the scheme.

CB: Do you then believe that the spirit exists from life to life?

JM: Ah, I'm not sure it's the same spiritual spark. But does it matter whether the spark of God that's in you now will be the same spark in your next life?

CB: I find the poem's idea of a twilight world between lives difficult to grasp.

JM: Well, it's full of event, to hear them talk. You know they're being instructed and given pep talks, all kinds of things preparing them for the next life.

CB: I was also baffled by this idea of a heavenly lab preparing souls, especially elite souls, which help shape the world's paradisaal future.

JM: Many of them don't go near the poem's lab, which is run by Gabriel, and peopled by Mirabell and company. But they do get from their patrons in the bureaucracy a sense of where they went wrong, like Matt Jackson getting lessons. He's not being made into a lab soul. He's just having his attitudes reshaped; you know, straightening him out the way a chiropractor does, and giving him the eagerness to enter a new life as a baby.

CB: At one stage in *Sandover* you say some spirit just missed "heaven." What do you mean by that?

JM: Oh, that's David's mother, Mary Jackson. That means that she missed the life she'd just ended being her last life, I mean ending her cycle of reincarnation. She is in fact going to be reborn one more time. She missed going to heaven at the end of that life and will have to have another. You miss a train and you catch the next.

CB: So heaven is the culmination of a reincarnative process?

JM: Loosely speaking, yes. Apparently when you finish your lives, having acquired too much power, then you go to the bureaucracy. That's quite clear, I think, in the poem.

CB: That state seems more like a hell than a heaven.

JM: I partly agree. Power kicks upstairs. Yet the people who are kicked upstairs continue to influence people on earth. They have representatives. That's the essence of the bureaucracy.

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CB: but its not a very "good" place?

JM: They're bored, they miss life. But not to be used is hell. Then the pleasures of heaven would be to feel that you are part of the whole extremely complex and ongoing scheme. Maria says somewhere in *Mirabell* that they are pleased to be as the angels want them. A character in Dante says, "In his will is our peace." To feel that you are being what you must be, according to the scheme, to the plan, is the ecstasy. It's not just sitting around singing Handel. What do people in your heaven do? They glorify God. I suppose they praise. They are lost in love and wonder.

CB: In orthodox theology heaven is presented as a place of perfect happiness. The fact that we look for more than can be achieved here presupposes that it will be reached in another world. Would people otherwise desire something beyond the capacities of earthly life?

JM: No. I'm thinking, again I'm judging of course by human standards, but it seems to me the moments of real happiness and spiritual happiness are the moments when I've been so engaged in an activity, usually writing, that I lose myself, that I lose sense of time, that I approach a kind of heavenly state, and therefore to argue that happiness has to do with action, you know, would fit into the sense of being used and being recycled. Keats talks about "the vale of soul-making."

Do Right to Write Right: Langston Hughes's Aesthetics of Simplicity

KAREN JACKSON FORD

The one thing most readers of twentieth-century American poetry can say about Langston Hughes is that he has known rivers. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" has become memorable for its lofty, oratorical tone, mythic scope, and powerful rhythmic repetitions:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins.

(1656)

But however beautiful its cadences, the poem is remembered primarily because it is Hughes's most frequently anthologized work. The fact is, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is one of Hughes's most uncharacteristic poems, and yet it has defined his reputation, along with a small but constant selection of other poems included in anthologies. "A Negro Speaks of Rivers," "A House in Taos," "The Weary Blues," "Montage of a Dream Deferred," "Theme for English B," "Refugee in America," and "I, Too"—these poems invariably comprise his anthology repertoire despite the fact that none of them typifies his writing. What makes these poems atypical is exactly what makes them appealing and intelligible to the scholars who edit anthologies—their complexity. True, anthologies produced in the current market, which is hospitable to the African-American tradition and to canon reform, now include a brief selection of poems in black folk forms. But even though Hughes has fared better in anthologies than most African-American writers, only a small and predictable segment of his poetry has been preserved. A look back

through the original volumes of poetry, and even through the severely redrawn *Selected Poems*, reveals a wealth of simpler poems we ought to be reading.¹

Admittedly, an account of Hughes's poetic simplicity requires some qualification. Most obvious is the fact that he wrote poems that are not simple. "A Negro Speaks of Rivers" is oracular; "The Weary Blues" concludes enigmatically; "A House in Taos" is classically modernist in both its fragmented form and its decadent sensibility. Even more to the point, many of the poems that have been deemed simple are only ironically so. "The Black Christ," for example, is a little jingle that invokes monstrous cultural complexity. Likewise, two later books, *Ask Your Mama* (1961) and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), contain an intricate vision of American history beneath their simple surfaces.² Nevertheless, the overwhelming proportion of poems in the Hughes canon consists of work in the simpler style; and even those poems that can yield complexities make use of simplicity in ways that ought not to be ignored.

The repression of the great bulk of Hughes's poems is the result of chronic critical scorn for their simplicity. Throughout his long career, but especially after his first two volumes of poetry (readers were at first willing to assume that a youthful poet might grow to be more complex), his books received their harshest reviews for a variety of "flaws" that all originate in an aesthetics of simplicity. From his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), to his last one, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), the reviews invoke a litany of faults: the poems are superficial, infantile, silly, small, unpoetic, common, jejune, iterative, and, of course, simple.³ Even his admirers reluctantly conclude that Hughes's poetics failed. Saunders Redding flatly opposes simplicity and artfulness: "While Hughes's rejection of his own growth shows an admirable loyalty to his self-commitment as the poet of the 'simple, Negro commonfolk' . . . it does a disservice to his art" (Mullen 74). James Baldwin, who recognizes the potential of simplicity as an artistic principle, faults the poems for "tak[ing] refuge . . . in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the very difficult simplicity of the experience" (Mullen 85).

Despite a lifetime of critical disappointments, then, Hughes remained loyal to the aesthetic program he had outlined in 1926 in his decisive poetic treatise, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." There he had predicted that the common people would "give to this world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself," a poet who would explore the "great field of unused [folk] material ready for his art" and recognize that this source would provide

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"sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work" (692). This is clearly a portrait of the poet Hughes would become, and he maintained his fidelity to this ideal at great cost to his literary reputation.

In what follows I will look at some of that forgotten poetry and propose a way to read it that refutes the criticism that most of Hughes's poetry is too simple for serious consideration. I will first reconstruct Hughes's conception of the poet by looking at one of his prose characters who embodies his poetics; and, second, I will turn to a reading of *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), a volume of poetry that typifies Hughes's aesthetic program.

In his column in the *Chicago Defender* on February 13, 1943, Hughes first introduced the prototype of the humorous and beloved fictional character Jesse B. Simple, nicknamed by his Harlem friends "Simple." For the next twenty-three years Hughes would continue to publish Simple stories both in the *Defender* and in several volumes of collected and edited pieces.⁴ Hughes called Simple his "ace-boy," and it is surely not coincidental that the Simple stories span the years, the 1940s to the 1960s, when Langston Hughes needed a literary ace in the hole.⁵ The success of the Simple stories was an important consolation of the writer's later years, when his poetry was reviewed with disappointment, his autobiography dismissed as "chit-chat," his plays refused on Broadway, and his fiction diminished in importance next to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).⁶

It seems obvious, however, that in the long association with his ace-boy Hughes found more than popularity and financial success. In fact, his prefatory sketches of Simple attest to the character's importance, in the sheer number of times Hughes sets out to explain him and in the specific details these explanations provide.⁷ All of them depict Simple as an African American Everyman, the authentic—even unmediated—voice of the community that engendered him. For instance, in "Who Is Simple?" Hughes emphasizes the authenticity of his creation: "[Simple's] first words came directly out of the mouth of a young man who lived just down the block from me" (*Best* vii). Here and elsewhere Hughes asserts a vital connection between the fictional character and the people he represents: "If there were not a lot of genial souls in Harlem as talkative as Simple, I would never have these tales to write down that are 'just like him'" (*Best* viii). The author's dedication to Simple is surely rooted in his conviction that Simple embodies and speaks for the very people to whom Hughes had

committed himself back in the 1920s. But Hughes's affinity with Simple is more complete than this.

Commentators on the Simple stories have concentrated on two points: theme, "Hughes's handling of the race issue" (Mullen 20); and genre, "the generic nature of these prose sketches" (Mullen 20).⁸ It is exclusively Hughes as prose artist we have acknowledged when considering these tales. However, I will argue that the Simple stories reveal a great deal about Hughes's poetic genius as well. Casting Simple as the figure of the poet illuminates Hughes's poetic program and explains his powerful affinity with his prose creation.

Crucial in tracing Simple's significance are the "Character Notes" to the 1957 musical comedy *Simply Heavenly*, which describe Simple in terms that stress his contradictions:

Simple is a Chaplinesque character, slight of build, awkwardly graceful, given to flights of fancy, and positive statements of opinion—stemming from a not so positive soul. He is dark with a likable smile, ordinarily dressed, except for rather flamboyant summer sports shirts. Simple tries hard to succeed, but the chips seldom fall just right. Yet he bounces like a rubber ball. He may go down, but he always bounds back up. (*Plays* 115)

The parallel to Charlie Chaplin, an icon of contradiction, is telling. Like Chaplin, whose physical appearance announces internal tensions (his hat is too small, his shoes too large, his vest too tight, his pants too loose), Simple is awkward yet graceful, ordinary yet flamboyant. And, again as with Chaplin, these external tensions reveal deeper ones; he is obstinate yet fanciful, decent yet flawed, and—perhaps most poignant for Hughes—optimistic despite failure.

Simple is a compelling figure for Hughes precisely because of these tensions. For these contraries—even the apparently internal ones—hang about Simple like a fool's motley. The fool's motley, of course, traditionally implies chaos; yet while his multicolored costume reflects the intricacies and contradictions around him, the fool himself may often be a perfect simpleton. This is also true of Hughes's character: though his appearance and even to some extent his character express contradiction, his fundamental nature is unequivocally simple. Obstinate, positivistic, and optimistic, Simple is able to register contradictions without finally resolving them and therefore has special significance for Hughes's poetic project. Hughes, after all, claims that "where life is simple, truth and reality are one" (*Big Sea* 311). Yet where in America is life simple for African Americans? The "where" Hughes invokes is not a place but a state of mind. The terms of his formulation—simplicity,

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truth, reality—are broad and vague because they are nearly synonymous to him. If one recognizes the simple facts of life, one will be able to see the truth; if one lives by the truth, one's reality will match one's ideals. Simplicity is truth in Hughes's vision.

Simple is the personification of such a poetics, a philosophy of composition that resorts to simplicity, not in response to singleness or triviality, but, ironically, in response to almost unspeakable contradiction. This is why he appears surrounded by complexities—his culture, his friends, even his clothing registering the confusion of the world around him. To shift the metaphor, simpleness, in both the character and the poetry, functions as a brick wall against which complexities collide. In its artless, uncomprehending refusal to incorporate contradictions, it exacerbates them. For a poet who equates simplicity with truth, cultivating a thematics and aesthetics of simplicity is essential—poetically and politically. Simplicity resists the pernicious subtleties and complexities of integrationist thought. Further, it reveals the inadequacies of such thought. But more important, it achieves these aims by reinstating the truth.

Let me turn to some examples. In "There Ought to Be a Law," Simple tells his friend Boyd that Congress ought to pass a law "setting up a few Game Preserves for Negroes" (*Reader* 181). Having seen a short movie about wildlife preserves, where "buffaloes roam and nobody can shoot a single one of them" (181), Simple concludes that "Congress ought to set aside some place where we can go and nobody can jump on us and beat us, neither lynch us nor Jim Crow us every day. Colored folks rate as much protection as a buffalo, or a deer" (181). Boyd, Simple's educated integrationist foil, first faults the plan for drawing a parallel between animals and humans: "Negroes are not wild," he asserts confidently. Yet in observing Simple's logical flaw, he misses Simple's important point. Precisely because blacks are human beings, they should be treated better than animals. Boyd admits, "You have a point there" (181), but immediately discerns another shortcoming in Simple's argument. When Simple says that one of the things he would like about living on a preserve is that he could "fight in peace and not get fined them high fines" (182), Boyd recoils: "You disgust me. I thought you were talking about a place where you could be quiet and compose your mind" (182). Again Boyd reacts against the racist stereotype that black men are physically aggressive.

In fact, however, the freedom to fight was suggested to Simple by a scene in the movie showing two elks locking horns. While Boyd would replace one behavioral cliché (black men fighting) with another (men

meditating in nature), he fails to see that both prescriptions curtail freedom. Once again, Simple makes the more substantial point: "I would like a place where I could do both" (182). While Simple's ideas always sound regressive at first, he ultimately articulates a far more radical position than Boyd's; and he does so by rejecting the falsifying complexities Boyd raises. Boyd's willingness to view all racial issues as hopelessly intricate finally renders him ineffective and conservative. Simple's obstinacy, on the other hand, enables him to view all issues in black and white, so to speak. Indeed, "There Ought to Be a Law" introduces, in a back-handed way, a black separatist position that Simple holds throughout the stories. Far from capitulating to white racist stereotypes about African Americans, Simple advocates a complete break with the white world and, thus, a thorough rejection of white racist assumptions.⁹

When Simple tries his hand at poetry in two stories, we can begin to see how he embodies Hughes's conception of the poet. Ironically, in "Wooing the Muse" Simple is first inspired to compose poetry when he leaves the city to spend his vacation on the beach. Though the natural setting is a conventional pretext for poetry, Simple's verses ignore the romantic idealization of nature in favor of his characteristic realism regarding a subject that interests him more, human nature:

Sitting under the trees
With the birds and the bees
Watching the girls go by. (Best 28)

In fact, he gently mocks Romantic clichés like "the birds and the bees" by incorporating such phrases into his irreverent lines. But it is precisely their status as clichés that Simple exploits, tossing off such lines as empty gestures toward figuration to contrast the way his poems barrel unmetaphorically toward their artless points (though his prose is highly figurative). And, of course, that second line is not just any cliché but a euphemism for sexual relations, and thus it receives a double reproof when Simple follows it with his blunt restatement, "Watching the girls go by."

Predictably, Boyd misses the poem's own logic and faults the verse for its failure to realize conventional Anglo-American form: "You ought to have another rhyme. *By* ought to rhyme with *sky* or something" (28). Boyd cannot read the poem on its own terms but views it only as an unfinished quatrain composed (ideally) of two rhymed (aa/bb) couplets. Simple, on the other hand, sees no reason why form should exceed meaning: "I was not looking at no sky, as I told you in the poem. I was looking at the girls" (30).

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Simple's second poem is a free-verse composition about racism; "This next one is a killer," he tells Boyd. "It's serious" (30). In it he compares the treatment of non-black immigrants in the United States with the mistreatment of African Americans:

I wonder how it can be
That Greeks, Germans, Jews,
Italians, Mexicans,
And everybody but me
Down South can ride in the trains,
Streetcars and busses
Without any fusses.
But when I come along—
Pure American—
They got a sign up
For me to ride behind:

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My folks and my folks' folkses
And their folkses before
Have been here 300 years or more—
Yet any foreigner from Polish to Dutch
Rides anywhere he want to
And is not subject to such
Treatments as my fellow-men give me
In this Land of the Free. (30)

Again the poem is evaluated in terms of conventional literary standards when Joyce, Simple's fiancée, wants him "to change *folkses* to say *peoples*" in order to elevate its diction (31). But since Simple doesn't have an eraser, his original phrasing is preserved. This suggests another constituent feature of Simple's poetry: it is improvisational. Even when he writes poems, they are subject to the pressures of the immediate moment and cannot be polished or refined.

While the lack of an eraser might suggest the opposite, that the poem is fixed and unchangeable, it actually indicates that the process of composition—rather than the product (which is another matter and might receive revision at another time)—is spontaneous and improvisational. In fact, Simple thinks this poem should be longer, but he has to conclude it where he does because Joyce interrupts him during composition. And his sense that the poem should have been longer derives not from some external formal measure but from the integral relationship of structure and meaning. Boyd, on the other hand, thinks "It's long enough" because he doubts the poem's worth; but Simple asserts, "It's not as long as Jim Crow" (31).

After a lengthy discussion with Boyd about why he does not write more nature poems, Simple recites a third piece—a ten-stanza toast in the “counting rhymes” genre, structured in tercets (until the final stanza which is five lines) rhyming aab, like a blues stanza. The “b” line in each stanza is also a refrain line throughout, as in a ballad:

When I get to be ninety-one
And my running days is done,
Then I will do better. (33)

Simple has concocted this toast as a retort to people who tell him, as Boyd has just done, “You should be old enough to know better.” Simple distinguishes between “knowing” and “doing”:

“I might be old enough to know better, but I am not old enough to *do* better,” said Simple. “Come on in the bar and I will say you a toast I made up the last time somebody told me just what you are saying now about doing better. . . . That’s right bartender, two beers for two steers. . . . Thank you! . . . Pay for them, chum! . . . Now, here goes. Listen fluently.” (33)

Several points in this passage bear upon Simple’s poetic practice. Most important is the assertion that recognizing (knowing) social or literary conventions need not result in enacting them (doing). When Simple orders “two beers for two steers,” he playfully supports this by infusing the poetical (by virtue of the rhymes) into the mundane as easily as he has infused the mundane into the poetical. Finally, when Simple cautions Boyd to “Listen fluently,” he coins a phrase that will appear again and again in the stories, whenever Simple suspects that habitual ways of “reading” will obstruct the proper reception of his compositions. The odd phrase pulls artist and audience together, insisting that writer and reader accompany each other in a new literacy. “Listen fluently” also introduces orality, and appropriately so, since it precedes the toast, an oral composition, and thus widens the scope of poetry. As we have seen, many of Simple’s poetic models are African-American folk forms—ballads, blues, toasts—genres that can claim written *and* oral status. Certainly Hughes, like Simple, “knows” about literary convention but chooses to “do” things his own way.

The opposition of correctness as knowledge and correctness as action (in the context of poetry, “action” means writing truthfully) is central to “Grammar and Goodness,” another story that treats Simple’s poetic production. Simple’s formulation of this borders on the nonsensical, like many of his wise sayings: “It is better to *do* right than to write right” (*Stakes* 182). Simple reads two poems to the narrator (who in this story is apparently not Boyd). The first is one that Joyce and

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Boyd have edited. Its conclusion uneasily renders Boyd's accommodationist perspective in Simple's belligerent style:

Now, listen, white folks:
 In line with Rev. King
 Down in Montgomery—
 Also because the Bible
 Says I must—
 In spite of bombs and buses,
I'm gonna love you.
 I say, I'm gonna LOVE you—
 White folks, OR BUST! (181)

The "authorities"—Reverend King and the Bible (and behind them, certainly, Joyce and Boyd)—want Simple's poem to advocate loving the enemy.

However, this conciliatory theme is gainsaid by the imperative construction, the screaming capital letters, the allusions to white violence, and the threatening last line (which comes off as a warning to whites to *be* lovable rather than as a promise on Simple's part to love them "in spite" of themselves). Despite these obvious contradictions, the narrator extricates a coherent "message" from the piece by ignoring its style, and doubts whether Simple could have written such a poem: "You never wrote a poem that logical all by yourself in life" (181). Simple admits this freely and offers another, unedited, poem in its place; it is no surprise when it completely contradicts the first one. It begins,

In the North
 The Jim Crow line
 Ain't clear—
 But it's here!

and ends,

Up North Jim Crow
 Wears an angel's grin—
 But still he sin.
 I swear he do!
 Don't you? (181)

Though the narrator agrees with the sentiment of this poem, he chides Simple "for the grammar" (182). Simple once again rejects the notion that poems must meet formal standards, claiming, "If I get the sense right . . . the grammar can take care of itself" (182). Both "Wooing the Muse" and "Grammar and Goodness" repudiate the aesthetics of traditional poetry, especially adherence to conventional forms, elevation

of diction, preference for written rather than oral forms, the necessity of polish and finish, and the subordination of content to form.

Simple is thus a folk poet in the African and African-American traditions. His poems are communal, colloquial, and often improvisational. When he uses existing verse forms, he chooses ballads, blues, toasts, and spirituals. Moreover, his speech is rendered lyrical through a high content of figuration and internal rhyme.¹⁰ In addition to his status as folk poet, however, Simple is the embodiment of—and, considering his life span, perhaps the defender of—Langston Hughes's aesthetic program. His name, an epigrammatic poem in its own right, captures this aspect of the character.

In "Family History" Simple explains his highly suggestive name:

"Grandpa's name was Jess, too. So I am Jesse B. Semple."

"What does the *B* stand for?"

"Nothing. I just put it there myself since they didn't give me no initial when I was born. I am really Jess Semple."

(*Speaks* 179)

Simple's name invokes his family history, a heritage that the story reveals is multi-racial. His name, then, links him to a diverse cultural past and thereby at least superficially legitimates him as a representative figure. A second interesting feature of his name is the self-defining middle initial "B." He says the "B" stands for nothing, but knowing him, we wonder if it doesn't signify "black." Or, it may derive from another story, "Bop," in which he explains to Boyd that the difference between the prefixes "*Re* and *Be*" (in "Re-Bop" and "Be-Bop") is that the "Be" signifies "the real thing like the colored boys play" (*Wife* 56). In such a reading, the middle initial "B" might indicate the integrity of self-authorship, a prerequisite for being an authentic representative of his larger culture. Even more suggestive are the puns involved in Simple's names. By giving himself the middle initial he transforms his given name from a negative description of himself—Jess Semple ("just simple")—into an imperative statement—Jess B. Semple ("just be simple"). The revised name, then, issues a commanding motto for Hughes's poetic program. And finally, "Semple" may also be an ironic appropriation of the middle name of Aimee Semple McPherson, the evangelist, who became a vicious and outspoken opponent of Hughes during the early forties.¹¹ It would be sweet revenge to name his irreverent, black-nationalist bard after a white evangelist who tried to censor and, failing that, publicly excoriated Hughes's poetry.

Simple's provocative name, his rich and original use of language, his obstinate literalism, his radical politics, and his eccentric appearance

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distinguish him as a poet figure and associate him with a long line of poetic simpletons—most important, with Shakespeare's fools. This is especially obvious in a story like "Cocktail Sip," where Boyd says Simple sounds like an Elizabethan poet, or "Midsummer Madness," in which Simple composes pithy proverbs. Like a Shakespearean fool, the Hughesian bard often encodes wisdom in nonsense.¹² Indeed, the cardinal point of the Simple stories is the wisdom of simplicity—a precept that, when applied to poetry, demands a daring aesthetic program.

Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), roughly contemporary with the Simple period, self-consciously engages in wooing Simple's muse. The volume is exemplary for two reasons: first, because it declares itself to be "A book of light verse," and second, because it has been largely overlooked by critics (the latter point undoubtedly due to the former). That is, its outspoken aesthetic recalcitrance has almost certainly doomed it to critical neglect. To read *Shakespeare in Harlem* we need an interpretive practice that accommodates these poems on their own terms, one that strives, as Simple would say, to "listen fluently."

From the prefatory note at the front of the book,

A book of light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood. Poems syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago's South Side.

Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung. Some with gestures, some not—as you like. None with a far-away voice (viii)

to "A Note on the Type" on the last page of the book,

The headings are set in Vogue Extra-Bold, a typeface designed in our time with the aim to express the utmost simplicity (125)

Shakespeare in Harlem equates the poetic with the simple. It declares itself to contain merely "light verse," "Afro-Americana"—a collection of folk materials—rather than high art. Like much of Hughes's canon, this book will employ folk forms—"blues, ballads, and reels"—that common readers are already familiar with from the oral culture. Indeed, the poet encourages readers to make the poems their own: they should be "read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung." Further, they can be acted out, "Some with gestures, some not." The preface, then, casts readers in the role of performers who will interpret the poems "as [they] like." The allusion to *As You Like It* is the first oblique reference to the namesake of the book. Yet this Shakespeare, in *Harlem*, is near at

hand, colloquial, folksy; he does not speak with the "far-away voice" of Elizabethan England or literary convention or classical poetry. Even his typeface expresses the "utmost simplicity."

But the appropriation of Shakespeare into simplicity in Harlem is not merely an adjustment undertaken for the audience, nor is it entirely a political maneuver. When Shakespeare goes to Harlem, he faces a crisis of language that is figured forth in extreme simplicity. The material and psychological conditions of Harlem as depicted here (elsewhere Hughes emphasizes its many positive aspects)—poverty, hunger, violence, lack of opportunity, unfathomable despair—render him almost speechless; it is only through the fool, conventionally a voice of simplicity amid overwhelming complexity, that the poet maintains expression. Like Virginia Woolf's imaginative "reconstruction" of the life of Julia Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*, in which she tries to imagine what would have been the fate of Shakespeare's sister (that is, of a talented female poet in the sixteenth century), Hughes is to some extent exploring what Shakespeare's fate would be were he an unemployed African American in twentieth-century Harlem.

Little wonder, then, that the title poem—in which we first hear how Shakespeare sounds in Harlem—is half nonsense:

Hey ninny neigh!
And a hey nonny noe!
Where, oh, where
Did my sweet mama go?

Hey ninny neigh
With a tra-la-la-la!
They say your sweet mama
Went home to her ma. (111)

The poem's nonsense syllables, as might be expected, echo a song from *As You Like It* which two pages sing in honor of the fool's engagement:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
That o'er the green cornfield did pass
In springtime, the only pretty ringtime,
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding.
Sweet lovers love the spring. (V.iii.15–20)

Shakespeare in Harlem reverses this song: love cannot be idealized through images of springtime and green fields. *As You Like It* itself ridicules romantic equations about love, nature, and the simple life, and the nonsense syllables in the pages' song suggest the fatuousness of

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those idealized formulations. In the Hughes poem, by contrast, the allusion to Shakespeare seems to marshal the linguistic resources of the fool. Here the nonsense, rather than echoing the mindless babble of the clichéd lyrics, disrupts the portentousness of the lines that communicate the loss of love. Indeed, the first two lines of nonsense in each quatrain seem almost to make possible the utterance of the final two lines that admit loss.

The structure of the stanzas, then, which move from nonsense to sense, suggests that the incantatory energy of the nonsense—deriving from rhymes, alliteration, exclamation marks, and most of all from the liberating effects of non-referential language—is necessary in order to accommodate the painful reality of the sense lines. The word “ninny” in Hughes’s stanzas can thus be read simultaneously as a nonsense utterance and a direct address to the fool, “Hey, Ninny.” In both cases the special capacities of foolishness are invoked. Similarly, the literal “no” that is released in the nonsensical “nonny noe” provides an aural negation of the otherwise ineluctable misfortune of the sense lines.

And though the poem sounds somewhat whimsical, lost love is not a comic subject in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. The “un-sonnet sequence” that opens the book (another revision of Shakespeare), “Seven Moments of Love,” demonstrates what the rest of the book will reiterate: that to be abandoned by a lover is to be cast deeper into poverty. “Supper Time” moves from poverty as an image of loneliness to poverty as the literal result of being alone:

I look in the kettle, the kettle is dry.
 Look in the bread box, nothing but a fly.
 Turn on the light and look real good!
 I would make a fire but there ain’t no wood.
 Look at that water dripping in the sink.
 Listen at my heartbeats trying to think.
 Listen at my footprints walking on the floor.
 That place where your trunk was, ain’t no trunk no more.
 Place where your clothes hung’s empty and bare.
 Stay away if you want to, and see if I care!
 If I had a fire I’d make me some tea
 And set down and drink it, myself and me.
 Lawd! I got to find me a woman for the WPA—
 Cause if I don’t they’ll cut down my pay. (4)

The un-sonnet sequence, indeed the entire book, treats love as a social rather than merely a private problem. Abandoned lovers are exposed to hunger and cold, to diminished wages and status. Details like the dry kettle, the empty breadbox, and the lack of firewood function

simultaneously as metaphors for the speaker's isolation and as factual examples of the hardships he will face living on only one income.

The title poem begins a process of recontextualization of private life that the rest of the book develops. In "Shakespeare in Harlem" a speaker registers his loss of love in the first quatrain and another person answers him with the reports of still other people ("they say") in the second quatrain. The poem, in a section of the book called "Lenox Avenue," obviously invokes the voices of the people living along the street. A man arrives home, discovers his partner is gone, asks where she went, and is answered by a crowd of neighbors that she went home to her mother. The communal nature of the event is further registered in the appellation "sweet mama" and in the lover's retreat to her own "ma." This is clearly a family affair, not the isolated nuclear family of suburbia but the extended family of a population that is shifting from the rural south to the urban north. (The Harlem resident's responsibility to aid even remote family members who move north is a repeated theme of the Simple stories.) Romance in this context is not the usual stuff of sonnets but a relationship modeled on the family, as the similarity between the terms "sweet mama" and "ma" indicates. The speaker's "sweet mama" has not left for independence or romance but has retreated to another community, where she will receive care: to her family. There can be little doubt that she is shrinking from the kind of hardships that the "Supper Time" speaker faces.

The poem's simplicity, then, has a great deal of work to do. The nonsense lines allude to a tradition of empty love sentiments even as they also tap the special verbal resources of the fool. The plurality of voices situates love as a public issue. The appellations "sweet mama" and "ma" suggest a paradigm of need and dependence that love can support but not conquer. Though the speaker may to some extent employ nonsense in an effort at "laughing to keep from crying," this cannot wholly account for the poem. After all, this is Shakespeare, a master of the oxymoron and paradox; that he resorts to nonsense and repetition indicates that his relocation to Harlem has taken a heavy linguistic toll.

"Shakespeare in Harlem" probably has echoes of another fool's song. King Lear's Fool advises that nonsense is an appropriate response (it is the sign, in fact, of some vestige of sense) to the extreme emotional and physical hardships that Lear and the Fool experience on the stormy heath:

He that has and a little tiny wit,
With a heigh-ho, the wind and the rain,
Must make content with his fortunes fit,

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For the rain it raineth every day. (III.ii.74-77)

The logic of the Fool's song turns on the double use of "little tiny wit": it argues that he who has a shred of sense left will employ a bit of humor to accept his situation, no matter how horrible it seems. The association of the fool's perspective with wisdom is here and elsewhere abbreviated in the word "wit" that refers at once to humor, to knowledge, and, most important, to a quality that humor and knowledge combined may inspire: ingenuity. In *As You Like It* Rosalind tells Touchstone what is true for nearly all of Shakespeare's fools at one time or another, "Thou speak'st wiser than thou art ware of" (II.iv.55). Hughes's simpletons are blood brothers to Shakespeare's fools.

The wisdom and ingenuity of the Ninny become apparent when we contrast two of the poems in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. In "Kid Sleepy" the title character, like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, prefers not to participate in life. To all of the speaker's efforts at imaginatively resuscitating him, Kid Sleepy responds, "I don't care":

Listen, Kid Sleepy,
Don't you want to get up
And go to work down-
Town somewhere
At six dollars a week
For lunches and car fare?

Kid Sleepy said,
I don't care. (24)

The prospect of working for a pittance, of earning just enough money to continue going to work, does not inspire Kid Sleepy. The speaker of "If-ing," on the other hand, is brimming with optimism and energy, though he has no more material resources than Kid Sleepy does. He has, instead, verbal ones:

If I had some small change
I'd buy me a mule,
Get on that mule and
Ride like a fool.

If I had some greenbacks
I'd buy me a Packard,
Fill it up with gas and
Drive that baby backward.

If I had a million
I'd get me a plane

And everybody in America'd
Think I was insane.

But I ain't got a million,
Fact is, ain't got a dime—
So just by *if*-ing
I have a good time! (32)

The difference between Kid Sleepy and this speaker is that the second speaker, as he proudly admits in stanza one, is a fool. He can acknowledge that he "ain't got a dime," but that "fact" is countered by another, more important, fact: he has had a good time.

Kid Sleepy, as his name indicates, has utterly succumbed to hardship, while the "*If*-ing" speaker has turned nonsense into a survival strategy. And notably that strategy is a linguistic game that finds new uses for even the most apparently unavailing words. The very contingency of the word "if" renders it susceptible to transformation. The fool Touchstone in *As You Like It* recognizes a similar indeterminacy in the word. Touchstone explains that quarrels can be resolved not by determining the truth or falsity of conflicting claims but by rejecting these inflexible categories:

All these [quarrels] you may avoid but the Lie Direct, and you may avoid that too, with an If. I knew when seven justices could not take up a quarrel, but when the parties were met themselves, one of them thought but of an If: as, "If you said so, then I said so"; and they shook hands and swore brothers. Your If is the only peacemaker. Much virtue in If. (V.iv.96–103)

Hughes's speaker also has discovered the virtue in "if," and he exploits its contingency in order to imagine a better life.¹³ Further, the speaker's word game employs rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, and rhetorical extravagance in order to conjure linguistic wealth. Kid Sleepy's response to poverty and unproductive work is more sensible than the second speaker's, but it is killing him. His name tells us he is on the brink of unconsciousness, he drowns in the harmful sun throughout the poem, and, most troubling, he has almost no language. His final utterance, the one that ends the poem and probably finishes off Kid Sleepy himself, lacks a subject and verb—lacks, that is, subjectivity and thus the capacity to act: "*Rather just / stay here*" (25). The "*If*-ing" speaker, by contrast, uses "I" nine times in his short poem and not only employs a range of action verbs but creates the most crucial one himself. Indeed, "coining" the word "*if*-ing" is another way he amasses his imaginary fortune.

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These two poems suggest that the simpleton's penchant for verbal play saves him because it makes linguistic production possible. When Shakespeare gets to Harlem, he is dumbstruck. Having recourse to the voice of the fool is how he continues to write poetry. What I have been calling his crisis of language is an important theme in these and other poems. It is also, however, a structural principle in the volume. The book consists of eight sections of poetry, four of which have generic designations that are anticipated in the preface: "Blues for Men," "Mammy Songs," "Ballads," and "Blues for Ladies." Two other titles emphasize locale rather than genre: "Death in Harlem" and "Lenox Avenue" (the street where Simple's hangout is located). All these sections answer to the interests of simplicity in their folk forms, common speakers, colloquial diction, everyday concerns, and uncomplicated ideas. Even more interesting are the first two sections: "Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues" and "Declarations" identify forms that are far simpler than ballads and blues: "moments," "declarations," a "statement," and one "little lyric." These new designations all emphasize brevity, bluntness, and simplicity, and they all take the thematics of simplicity to the structural level. As we will see, the poems themselves function like little elemental chunks of poetry that resist complication and elaboration. If we can find ways to read these atomic lyrics, we will have begun to achieve fluency in Hughes's poetry of simplicity.

I will conclude, then, by looking at several such poems in the "Declarations" section. The section title warns that these poems are not meditative or subtle in content, not figurative or lyrical in form. Instead, they are blurtings that make poetry out of the obvious or even the obtuse. "Hope," for example, reveals that the speaker's sense of possibility depends in an ironic way on her or his impoverished mental and linguistic resources:

Sometimes when I'm lonely,
 Don't know why,
 Keep thinkin' I won't be lonely
 By and by. (16)

It is precisely the speaker's not knowing that makes hope possible. To know more, to think this out more thoroughly, would surely mean the eradication of all hope. The speaker's language supports the sense that inarticulateness is bliss; the last line, "By and by," is a phrase from spirituals and hymns, songs that turn from misery toward hope by positing another time when suffering will be alleviated and even rewarded.

The speaker seems not to know where this formulation originates,

but it is nevertheless part of her or his severely limited verbal repertoire. The exhaustion and vagueness of "by and by," ironically, make it efficacious. Two insubstantial words create hope by putting the concreteness of a harsh reality (now) into relation with the abstractness of a better future time (then); and in the process the phrase conjures up an in-between realm of relation even though it cannot visualize hope in more decisive terms. Further, "by" is a homonym for the "bye" in "goodbye" and lends a sense of finality that shuts down further thought and thus staves off despair. "Hope" is achieved, then, by dwelling in an intellectual and linguistic limbo, by waiting in some state that is neither "here" nor "there"—a provisional state characterized by verbal simplicity. "By and by" defers all the mental and linguistic processes that would inevitably lead to the negation of hope.

"Statement" announces its simplicity in its title. And, true to its name, it offers only this bare fact:

Down on '33rd Street
They cut you
Every way they is. (28)

The speaker making this statement has no time for pondering the by-and-by, subject as he is to the perils of the present moment. The knife-wielding, anonymous "they" are not just the perpetrators of street violence but also other evils—hunger, poverty, unemployment, disappointment—that produce physical violence (as the dialect "they" for "there" suggests). The ubiquitousness of "they" and "every way" demands the full attention of this speaker, who can only state or declare the bald truth about life on 133rd Street. The conditions of his existence prevent him from analyzing, lyricizing, or elaborating his plight. The reader, of course, can do these things; in fact, to listen fluently is to analyze these brief utterances and elaborate recognitions and insights that move beyond them. But "Statement" itself remains a hard fact and thus an obstinate form that articulates the exigencies of Harlem.

Finally, "Little Lyric" self-consciously demonstrates the way that poetry will be altered when Shakespeare gets to Harlem: The poem's epigraph insists parenthetically that this little lyric is "*Of Great Importance*":

I wish the rent
Was heaven sent. (21)

What is lost in reproducing the poem here is the way the tiny couplet is engulfed by the rest of the page. The white space that ominously

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surrounds it is as crucial to a reading of the poem as its two lines are. "Little Lyric" says visually that the sigh of desire expressed in the poem has been nearly extinguished by the vast emptiness around it. The visual hopelessness and fragility of the poem on the page are translated into language in the poem proper. Like "by and by," the idiomatic phrase "heaven sent" does not express a real confidence in divinity to pay the rent miraculously but rather employs the unavailing concept of heaven to figure forth dumb luck. Since there is obviously no heaven (as the hardships and injustices of Harlem seem to indicate), or at least no heaven that is willing to intervene, wishing "the rent / Was heaven sent" is merely an ironic way to acknowledge that the rent will not be paid. Again the brevity of the poem, the sufficiency of its perfect rhymes, and the elemental simplicity of its point are features that defy further elaboration within the poem.

The "Little Lyric" enacts the near loss of language. It reveals in an extreme form what all the other poems in the volume suggest—that utter simplicity is the only adequate response to a dislocated life in an urban ghetto in a racist country. Simplicity, as we have seen, sometimes takes the form of nonsense and foolishness and sometimes takes the form of brevity and obviousness. Both manifestations of Hughes's aesthetics of simplicity forgo the complexities of "great poetry" in order to express something that is "of great importance." Such poems would rather do right than write right.

NOTES

¹ Easily ninety per cent of the poems in Hughes's canon are of the sort that I am describing as simple.

² Jemie, Hudson, and Miller, among others, have persuasively demonstrated the intricacies of Hughes's jazz structures in these two late books.

³ Reviews in which these epithets appear are collected in Mullen.

⁴ The stories are collected in five volumes, *The Best of Simple*, *Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim*, *Simple Takes a Wife*, and *Simple's Uncle Sam*. Additionally, Hughes takes Simple to the stage with *Simply Heavenly*, a comedy about Simple's marriage.

⁵ In "Who Is Simple?"—the foreword to *The Best of Simple*—Hughes concludes, "He is my ace-boy, Simple. I hope you like him, too" (viii).

⁶ For a chronicle of Hughes's disappointments during these years, see Rampersad, especially chapter 8 of the second volume "In Warm Manure: 1951 to 1953." Ellison characterized *The Big Sea* as a "chit-chat" book during an interview with Rampersad in 1983 (202).

⁷ Hughes wrote at least four explanations of Simple: "The Happy Journey of 'Simply Heavenly,'" "Simple and Me," "Who Is Simple?" and the "Character Notes" to *Simply Heavenly*.

⁸ In his Introduction Mullen surveys the scholarship on the Simple stories; all the works he cites discuss either their racial politics or their prose structures.

⁹ One might wonder how a character described as an "Everyman" or a "black separatist"—that is, as a stereotype—can break stereotypes. That is, how can black separatism resist stereotypes when it, *by definition*, carries racist stereotypes with it? This is a subtlety that would not interest Simple, who accepts the necessity of his own racism and rejects the idea that African Americans should "overcome" black nationalist stereotypes. As long as white racism prevails, he will resist it in kind. See "Color on the Brain" (*Stakes* 106–110) for one of many exchanges between Simple and Boyd about this issue.

¹⁰ In "Cocktail Sip," for example, Boyd's quotations of Elizabethan poetry are juxtaposed with Simple's rhyming prose: "Zarita is strictly a after-hours gal—great when the hour is late, the wine is fine, and mellow whiskey has made you frisky" (*Wife* 47).

¹¹ Rampersad explains McPherson's antagonism to Hughes in chapter 14 of his second volume: "McPherson had a specific reason to harass Hughes. She was one of the allegedly fraudulent ministers of religion mentioned by name in his 'Goodbye Christ'" (390).

¹² For discussions of the fool that emphasize the wisdom of his simplicity, see Welsford, Willeford, Weimann, and Goldsmith.

¹³ In his chapter on *Henry IV, Part I*, Holland makes a similar point, describing Falstaff's way of using "if" as a habit of speech that liberates him from the world of responsibilities and permits him to enter a "world of imaginings" (119).

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Double Discourses in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*

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In *The World According to Garp* John Irving forms a type of dialogue within the narration by creating a narrator who uses a double discourse: that of the biographer and that of the fiction writer. It is not unusual in the *Bildungsroman* genre, to which this novel most certainly belongs, for the narrator to adopt the role of biographer to a certain extent. *Bildungsroman* narrators do not generally, however, adopt that stance as explicitly as Irving's narrator does. As Michael Priestly notes, the narrator "is intended to be Garp's official biographer" (87). Using evidence from secondary sources, paying particular attention to the incidents in Garp's life that appear in his fiction, and evaluating Garp's writing and artistic philosophy, the narrator often adopts an academic language—that of literary biography. The text he creates is one suitable for fictive future students of Garp's work, who also want to be informed about his life. As presented in this language, Garp is not a character created but a historical figure for study. When he does treat Garp as a character, however, the narrator adopts the language of fiction. Calling attention to his omniscient power over the text, the narrator manipulates the sequence of events, spins metaphors, creates a persona, adopts comic and satiric attitudes, and uses the present tense—the techniques of the fabricator.

Using both the language of biography and that of fiction, the narrator's discourse reflects an important conflict that develops in Garp as artist, that of memory versus imagination. In his youth Garp's imagination seems to be easily accessible to him. But as he develops in this *Kunstlerroman*, he relies more and more on memory, although he fights that reliance. As Gabriel Miller writes, "one problem he [Garp]

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must contend with during the novel is an inability to separate his own personal life from his fiction" (90). During his stay in Vienna as a young man, Garp creates a wonderful short story from only a few details from his experience. But he knows, even this early in his career, that "Imagination . . . came harder than memory" (87) because he has watched his mother Jenny Fields at the typewriter. In the time that she writes her entire autobiography, Garp manages only one rather lengthy short story. Always conscious of the lesson learned from reading Marcus Aurelius, that the difference between good and bad writers is not subject matter but "intelligence and grace" (88), Garp chooses a subject quite separate from his experience for his first novel. Ironically, he later feels that his novel, *Procrastination*, suffered from being too distant from his life. No amount of intelligence and grace could overcome the lack of first-hand knowledge of Vienna during the Russian occupation. In his next novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, Garp attempts to weld biography and fiction by simply altering the events of his life, but he produces a work of questionable literary value. His short story "Vigilance" is almost literally autobiography, and the result is a comic but "small" story. In his third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, Garp uses autobiographical material, but, by narrating through the consciousness of a character unlike himself, he manages to apply imagination and to create rather than simply record. Finally he rediscovers the balance between memory and art. In the novel he is writing when he dies, *My Father's Illusions*, Garp has the same imaginative control of experience that he achieved in his first piece of fiction. His growth as a writer, then, encompasses his regaining as an adult the aesthetic perspective that he had as a young man.

Just as Garp is drawn toward the language of memory, the narrator is influenced by the language of fiction, the art form of his *Kunstlerroman* hero. When the narrator commences the text he seems sure of his biographical approach, but soon he becomes seduced by the fiction writer's freedom with his material, as well as by Garp's life and art, and his discourse begins to reflect techniques borrowed from the fabricator's craft. Conversely, Garp begins his career determined to use only imagination, but soon he becomes seduced by the ease of recording his life, the narrator's ostensible task. His discourse begins to reflect techniques borrowed from the biographer's craft. In this way the narrator's struggle with the languages of fiction and biography is the mirror image of Garp's struggle as a writer with the forces of memory and imagination.¹ This double tension creates a kind of dialogue in the narration, a trait indicative of Irving's earlier novels as well.

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In his first two novels and, to a lesser extent, in his third novel Irving experimented with the kind of layered narrative voices and incorporated genres that provide the complex dialogue in *Garp*. Indeed, in *Setting Free the Bears*, his first novel, Irving relies on three voices, each of which raises a question about the division between biography and fiction. Although Hannes Graf is Irving's central narrator in *Bears*, his voice controls only parts one and three. In part two Hannes transcribes, apparently word for word, Siegfried Javotnik's notebooks, much as the narrator in *Garp* presents Garp's fiction. Once the text is turned over to Siggy in part two, though, it picks up not one but two voices. One voice is Siggy's as he records his watches while planning the zoo break; these records make clear that Graf is Siggy's intended audience. The second is Siggy's as historian and autobiographer; the audience in these segments is the more general, unknown audience of any text whose writer hopes, as Siggy seems to have hoped, that it will be published. Although Siggy credits his source for the biographical events that occur prior to his ability to remember them, "At least Ernst Watzek-Trummer claims so, and I take my history from him" (201), the dialogue he quotes extensively surely comes from his imagination. In other words, he, not unlike Garp in Irving's fourth novel, creates fiction from his life. Siggy is not, however, the only writer in this text who feels free to adapt biography by employing fictional techniques; as we learn in part three, Hannes has altered his sources for part two by choosing and reshaping, as the fiction writer does: "Of course, there's more to the notebook than that. And, of course, the zoo watches and the autobiography don't appear together in the original; it was my idea to interleaf them" (221).

In his second novel, *The Water-Method Man*, Irving continues to weave a novelistic whole from various voices. The pattern of the first five chapters exemplifies the narrative structure: chapter one uses the first-person narration of Fred Bogus, chapter two uses a third-person narration, chapter three uses no narrator per se, for it consists of a letter, chapter four uses Bogus as narrator again, and chapter five returns to the third-person narrator. Irving does, however, break from the neat arrangement of one narrator per chapter and mix the controlling voices within chapters, as he does in chapter ten. Within the third-person narration, in a manner perfected by Irving's narrator in *Garp*, the narrator shows his proximity to the central character when he presents the character's language as his own, as he does through his use of exclamation marks and his lack of quotation marks in the second sentence that follows: "Trummer listened to Colm's sweet breathing.

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How fragile children's faces are in sleep!" (427). Parallel to the narrative style of *Garp* in another way, this novel incorporates parts of a film script as well as reviews of the completed film, letters, lines and explication of the Norse poem "Akthelt and Gunnel," and a chapter from the novel *Vital Telegrams*. In addition, Irving explores the effects of the present tense in a text that is predominantly in past tense, as he does in chapter eleven when Bogus shifts from past to present and back to past without a page break or any other cue. In *The Water-Method Man*, then, Irving's multi-layered narrative suggests the fractured mind and spirit of his central character, a method of storytelling Irving returns to with great success in *Garp*.

Irving abandons the plural voices he established in the first two novels in his third one, *The 158-Pound Marriage*, and chooses a single first-person narrator who is a historical-novelist, a choice that seems to refuse the tension Irving has established between the two sides of that hyphen. Speaking of this novel, Harter and Thompson claim that Irving fails to "create a multidimensional narrative persona who can embody an artistically integrated human experience, an experience that should be revealed through its narration" (60). Certainly *The 158-Pound Marriage* is Irving's weakest novel to date, due in large part to its narrative limitations. Yet in its uneasy blend of history and fiction we can see Irving struggling with a theme and a style that remain key to his work. For example, when the anonymous narrator adopts his friend Severin's point of view, complete with extensive dialogue in a scene from which the narrator was most surely absent (chapter 8), he is practicing his trade, coaxing fiction from second-hand information, as both *Garp* and the narrator in *Garp* do.

In regard to Irving's interest in narrative voices and the conflict between life and art, biography and fiction, the first novels represent crucial experiments in form and theme. Not until *Garp*, however, does Irving shape a text that codifies voice and theme so effectively. In an analysis of the narration of *Garp* the theory of Susan Lanser is most helpful. As Lanser suggests, a study of the phraseological and psychological stances of a narrator reveals the ways in which he or she is affected by the textual world. "Phraseological stance" refers to the "languages"² in the text. This stance reflects a range of discourse styles from diegetic to mimetic, in which pure diegetic discourse is the narrator's own language and mimetic discourses are written records he or she provides for the reader. A midway point is a character's indirect tagged discourse. As Lanser notes, the range between diegetic and mimetic indicates "not only phraseological form, but also the degree to

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which the narrator is involved in a given segment of discourse" (187). Psychological stance is a measure of the narrator's distance from or affinity with a character or event. It refers not only to the quantity of information given about a particular character or event but also to the kind of information given—subjective or objective (205). Subjective information reveals the perceiver's ideology while objective information does not. Psychological stance further incorporates "how" a character is seen, whether the vision is internal or external (209). In addition, the depth of the vision, whether the perceiver supplies only what can be seen and heard or also supplies the thoughts of the character (212), might be considered. Through these indications one can determine the degree to which the narrator approves or disapproves of the character (215).

The secondary sources Irving's narrator uses in *Garp* correspond to the most mimetic manner of expression in Lanser's description of the phraseological stance—journals and written records. The narrator's adoption of Garp's fiction style also reveals his phraseological stance, for this is a language borrowed from the character; therefore it is a kind of hybridization. But the narrator's reproduction of large parts of Garp's fiction and his interest in the events in Garp's life that influenced his fiction are indications of the narrator's psychological stance. In addition, the depth of the narrator's "subjective information" about Garp reveals his affinity with Garp—a further measure of his psychological stance.

The first sentence of the novel establishes the narrator as researcher and the text as "fictionalized history" (Harter and Thompson 75), in its attention to detail, date, and place: "Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, was arrested in Boston in 1942 for wounding a man in a movie theatre" (3). The speaker assumes that we know the Garp spoken of, and that, indeed, we are reading this book because its title announces Garp as its subject. The first sentence also suggests that the narrator feels no need to write "T. S. Garp," for in the tradition of literary criticism and biography one often refers to well-known writers by their last names. As he proceeds, the narrator continues in the biographical format when he quotes from various written records. Mikhail Bakhtin calls such external documents "incorporated genres": "All these genres, as they enter the novel, bring into it their own languages, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways" (321). These genres are mimetic elements from the phraseological stance, in Lanser's terminology. But the prominence the narrator assigns to them in his

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text reveals his psychological stance—his admiration and respect for the artist. In the narrator's biography these genres are sources of information about the life he portrays. (In Irving's novel they serve a similar purpose, though a fabricated one: they introduce a voice apart from the narrator's and a language separate from the narration.) One finds quotations from Garp's journals and personal papers, Jenny Fields's published autobiography, Garp's fiction, and his critical reviews, all of which stratify the novel while for the most part they suggest the narrator's role as biographer.³

In the first two chapters the narrator provides twenty-six quotations of Garp's words from an unknown source. One finds such references throughout the novel (except for chapters 6 and 10–15), but not to the extent that one finds them in the beginning, when the narrator initiates his role as biographer by providing evidence of his research. Seemingly taken from Garp's journal, although we never hear of his writing one, the first quotations are autobiographical in content. They provide evidence to support the narrator's recounting of Jenny Fields's early years: "‘My mother,’ Garp wrote, ‘was a lone wolf’" (4); "‘My mother,’ Garp wrote, ‘was not one for making fine distinctions’" (6); and "‘My mother,’ Garp wrote, ‘went through her life on the lookout for purse-snatchers and snatch-snatchers’" (8). At times the narrator uses his storehouse of biographical material to form a larger part of his narration. For example, the narrator quotes Garp's explanation of what a ball turret gunner is after he establishes the fact that "Garp's father was a ball turret gunner" (15). Generally, however, the narrator selects only one or two sentences from the famous writer's papers and marks the quotation with the narrative tag "Garp wrote."

Quotations from Jenny Fields's autobiography work in a similar fashion, but the source for this information is clearly Jenny's autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*. As biographer, Irving's narrator uses these quotations to provide evidence of the influence Garp's mother had upon him. The narrator records Jenny's famous words: "I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too" (13). Jenny manages to conceive without sharing her body. And Garp's *Bildung* is clearly shaped by the manner of his conception. His ideology is also influenced by this strong woman's very certain ideas about the rights of the individual and those of women in particular.⁴ The narrator quotes her on the subject of Garp's father:

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"Of course I *felt* something when he died," Jenny Fields wrote in her famous autobiography. "But the best of him was inside me. That was the best thing for both of us, the only way he could go on living, the only way I wanted to have a child. That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn't respect the rights of an individual." (23)

The most important texts for the biographer, however, are T. S. Garp's novels and stories.⁵ A particularly generous biographer, this narrator goes beyond the usual reproduction of passages from the writer's work and reprints for us in full Garp's first notable piece of fiction, the short story "The Pension Grillparzer." Like an academic biographer, the narrator does not discuss the work so much as he describes the period of Garp's life from which it comes. For this purpose the narrator tells us that "In his time spent in pensions, Garp discovered that a water closet was a tiny room with nothing but a toilet in it. . . . The W.C., of course, would also feature prominently in Garp's story" (83). In addition, the narrator explores the evolution of the story:

He saw a four-member circus unload from Hungary, or Yugoslavia, at a railroad station. He tried to imagine *them* in his story. There had been a bear who rode a motorcycle, around and around a parking lot. A small crowd gathered and a man who walked on his hands collected money for the bear's performance in a pot balanced on the soles of his feet; he fell, occasionally, but so did the bear. (86)

Because that description precedes Garp's short story in the text, the narrator has prepared us for the parallels between the events in Garp's life and his first work of fiction. He further explores the story's creation when he describes Garp's visit to the writer's room in the museum that Jenny has directed him to: "The writer . . . was named Franz Grillparzer; Garp had never heard of him" (86). Soon we learn that Garp has made progress with his story and has decided to incorporate a bad circus and a pension named Grillparzer. And, guiding us through the young writer's development, the narrator as biographer divides the story into two parts in his own text: the first part Garp wrote before he understood the meaning of death, but the second part follows the death of Charlotte, the whore Garp came to love.

Conversely, we receive only the narrator's summaries, not excerpts, of Garp's first and second novels. The first, entitled *Procrastination*, is called "'historical.' It is set in the Vienna of the war years, 1938-45, and through the period of the Russian occupation" (137). The narrator summarizes the novel for us, records the various reviews it received,

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and comments on the book's impact: "It was, of course, never a popular book, and it hardly made T. S. Garp into a brand name; it would not make him 'the household product'—as he called her—that his mother had become" (139). Although Garp avoids the autobiographical in his work because, as the narrator writes (borrowing Garp's adjectives), "He knew about all the shitty autobiographical associations that make those rabid readers of gossip warm to an occasional fiction" (328), Garp's second novel clearly uses events from his life. The narrator-biographer makes that evident when he carefully details the Garps' affairs with Alice and Harrison Fletcher upon which the novel is based. Garp insists that *Second Wind of the Cuckold* is "not about us . . . It's not about any of that. It just uses that." But, as the narrator says, the novel "was about four people whose finally unequal and sexually striving relationship is a bust" (160). As Gabriel Miller asserts, "Garp's vision is a limited one, consistently colored by autobiography and his obsession with death; he's unable to get beyond his personal life" (107). The reader has no doubt, nor does the biographer, that Garp's second novel bears a strong resemblance to the Garps' and the Fletchers' experiment in neighborly love and that Garp uses too much memory and not enough imagination in its creation.

The narrator reveals the source for Garp's short story "Vigilance" by relating in the chapter entitled "The Eternal Husband" how Garp, suffering from writer's block, chases cars on his street. As he approaches them, he berates the drivers for speeding where children play. Three chapters later, in "It Happens to Helen," the narrator records Garp's short story "Vigilance" in full. Written to try to win Helen back, just as Garp used "The Pension Grillparzer" to get her to marry him, this story has none of the merit of Garp's earlier story. Helen knows why: "I mean, what is it? A self-parody? You're not old enough, and you haven't written enough, to start mocking yourself. It's self-serving, it's self-justifying; and it's not about anything except yourself, really" (238). In other words, it is a record of his life, not art. The story is Garp's attempt to use only the language of memory. But the biographer shows the relation of Garp's life to his art, how the two intertwine, by printing the short story.

The final piece of Garp's fiction reproduced by the narrator is the first chapter of *The World According to Bensenhaver*. By the time the narrator presents this chapter, the reader knows of not one but perhaps three biographical impulses behind the gruesome rape story. First of all, as the son of Jenny Fields, the famous feminist who helps abused women (the Ellen Jamesians, for example), Garp has been exposed to

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female suffering for most of his life. In addition, Garp has found in the park a young girl who has just been raped. Although he catches the rapist and becomes a hero, Garp feels responsible: "Rape, Garp thought, made men feel guilty by association" (149). Finally, the novel that Garp writes is influenced by the disastrous car crash that kills his son, Walt. Unlike the autobiography of "Vigilance," however, as Harter and Thompson note, in this novel Garp has found "an objective distance" (95). In fact, these critics see the first chapter of *The World According to Bensenhaver* as a measure of "Garp's maturing aesthetic purpose and vision" (97). He is beginning to learn how to control the facts of his life with his imagination.

In the narrator's text as biography, one finds another incorporated genre, the critical reviews of Garp's fiction. The inclusion of these reviews suggests that, as a student of the famous writer Garp, the narrator has done his homework. He records Garp's first rejection: "The story is only mildly interesting, and it does nothing new with language or with form. Thanks for showing it to us, though" (129). And in reference to Garp's *Procrastination* the narrator reproduces these reviews: "It is amazing that the now-famous son of Jenny Fields has actually grown up to be what he said he wanted to be when he grew up" (139). Another reviewer wrote, "Young Mr. Garp is still writing about bears. Perhaps, when he grows up, he'll write something about people" (139). A critic of *Second Wind of the Cuckold* "called the novel 'bitterly truthful,' but he hastened to point out that the bitterness doomed the novel to the status of 'only a minor classic'" (159-60). "The novel confused nearly everyone; even its reviews were confusing" (160) the narrator writes. Ironically, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, which Garp's publisher John Wolf thought was so pornographic as to warrant publication in the pornographic *Crotch Shots*, earned Garp this very winning review:

"The women's movement has at last exhibited a significant influence on a significant male writer" wrote the reviewer, who was an associate professor of women's studies somewhere. She went on to say that *The World According to Bensenhaver* was "the first in-depth study, by a man, of the peculiarly male neurotic pressure many women are made to suffer." And so forth. (342)

These mimetic records establish the separation of the narrator's voice from the voices he records. But on a psychological plane his recording of these genres suggests the high value he applies to them.

In addition to quoting his sources, the biographer discusses Garp's

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thoughts about writing and provides an informed summary of Garp's aesthetic ideas. This subjective approach and the display of Garp's unconscious thoughts further reveal the narrator's psychological stance—his affinity and approval. In such discussions the narrator approaches Garp's essential aesthetic problem, the tension between memory and art. We learn that Garp thought "a writer's job is to imagine everything so personally that the fiction is as vivid as our personal memories" (119). Similarly, the narrator writes, "What was 'going on,' in Garp's opinion, was never as important as what he was making up—what he was working on" (135). That the two impulses, what's going on and what's made up, are implicated is clear from the narrator's claim that "His first novel, *Procrastination*—in his opinion—suffered from the pretentious weight of all the fascist history he had taken no real part in. His second novel suffered from his failure at imagining *enough*—that is, he felt he had not imagined far enough beyond his own fairly ordinary experience" (170). In these passages the narrator explores Garp's struggle to find a subject and a style without succumbing to autobiography or losing vividness by relying too heavily on imagined life. A degree of the difficulty Garp experiences in that struggle is suggested when the narrator quotes Garp's metaphor about writing: "If you are careful, . . . if you use good ingredients, and you don't take any shortcuts, then you can usually cook something very good. . . . With writing, I find, you can have all the right ingredients, give plenty of time and care, and still get nothing" (176). The narrator also shares Garp's frustration with the insignificance of his life's work. For instance, he quotes Garp's consideration of the lack of social value in art: "Art doesn't help anyone. . . . People can't really use it: they can't eat it, it won't shelter or clothe them—and if they're sick, it won't make them well" (179–80).

Irving's narrator, using the language of the biographer, quotes written records as evidence for his claims about Garp's life and discusses his aesthetic philosophy. Harter and Thompson refer to "the tone and technique of the objective biographer who deftly sketches . . . in matter-of-fact, even journalistic form" the first two pages of the novel (85).⁶ This is the language of memory that Garp strives to keep to a minimum in his fiction. Beneath the surface of this biographical style, however, the narrator tends to manipulate the text with the techniques of a fiction writer.⁷ Influenced by Garp's language, the narrator uses figurative language, creates a persona, adopts a comic and satiric approach, and writes in the present tense. These are indications of the

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influence of Garp's language on the narrator's. This imaginative language is the one that Garp strives to make dominant in his own work.

Rather than simply retelling events as they occurred, a method Garp as fiction writer tries to avoid, but a method the biographer would not normally avoid, the narrator uses the fictional methods of foreshadowing and withholding information. For instance, the narrator foreshadows the car accident when he describes Garp's driveway trick. If Garp knew the children were sleeping upon his return home at night, he would turn off the car's engine and the lights and coast up the driveway, using the momentum from the descent of the road leading to it. Helen called this practice "puerile and dangerous" (224), a comment that stays with the reader. In further preparation for the accident's outcome, the uncovered metal shaft of the Volvo's stick shift has been described at some length and mentioned frequently. As a result, as soon as the reader learns that Garp and the boys will arrive home while Helen and Michael are still parked in the dark driveway, he understands the potential for disaster. The narrator as fiction writer adds to the suspense he establishes when he refuses to chronicle the accident immediately. Although we suspect the collision, the chapter ends with Walt's response to the feeling of climbing up the driveway without lights and engine: "It's like a dream!" (266). A few paragraphs into the next chapter, we learn of the injuries to Duncan, Helen, Michael, and Garp. But we don't learn of Walt's death until twenty pages later (284).

His role as a fiction writer's biographer also affects the narrator's discourse stylistically. Although he uses few metaphors in the text, compared to many other third-person narrators, he does employ figurative language. The chapter "Second Love, Second Children," for instance, opens with a comic description of Walt's name that as a writer Garp would surely envy: "He was simply a *t* at the end of a wall. Walt: like a beaver's tail smacking water, like a well-hit squash ball" (152). The narrator has the advantage of distance that allows him to apply figurative language to his depiction of Duncan's lost eye, which he describes as "a kind of tidal irrigation of the hole where Duncan's right eye had been" (257). The narrator also knows how to incorporate anthropomorphic images poetically. For instance, when Helen's student hands Garp the note she has written saying that Helen is having an affair with the student's ex-boyfriend, the narrator writes: "The slow unwrapping of the note—so it wouldn't tear—made sounds as crisp as autumn, though all around Garp it was a cold March, the hurt ground

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thawing to mud. The little note snapped like bones as he opened it" (250). And the narrator displays the influence of Garp's language on his own when he uses a metaphor taken from Garp's first short story: "like a bear holding a great trough of food in his forepaws" (257). The narrator also enjoys Garp's Under Toad story. He uses the image as the source of several metaphoric passages: "His voice against the stolid stone buildings bounced back to him like the froggy belching of the Under Toad, the foul and warty beast whose sticky nearness he felt like breath" (345); "The room reeked of toad" (401); "Garp heard the cold hop of the Under Toad thudding across the cold floors of the silent house" (511). After the attack of the woman in the white Saab, "he heard the croak of the vile-tasting Under Toad in his dry throat" (557).

Seeming to forget his role as biographer, the narrator allows his voice to invade the text in a manner befitting the narrator in one of Garp's own novels. He makes personal comments and observations and uses exclamation and question marks. For example, he seems to have transported himself to the scene of Garp's early years when, after mentioning the books that Jenny brings into the infirmary annex, he exclaims, "What a wet dream for lovers of literature, to lie sick at Steering! At last, a hospital with something good to read" (28). Only one of two voices could be responsible for such an exclamation: Garp's or the narrator's. Since there is no suggestion that Garp has taken charge of the narration, one must assume that the narrator has appropriated Garp's language. The same is true when the narrator describes the scene of the cannon: "Hundreds of prophylactics! A display of arrested reproduction. Like dogs urinating around the borders of their territory, the boys of the Steering school had left their messes in the mouth of the mammoth cannon guarding the Steering River" (71). This is a passage that the writer of *The World According to Bensenhaver* might have written with some pride. In addition to these signs of the narrator's other voice, he joins in the narrative as only a homodiegetic narrator could. For instance, he says of Garp's and Alice's lovemaking, "And they made love, of course, and despite what everyone knows about such things, it *was* special" (156). The narrator also suddenly speaks openly to the reader as he has not before. He writes of Garp's conflict with the Ellen Jamesians, "They let Garp seethe. What else could they do? It was not one of Garp's better points: tolerance of the intolerant. Crazy people made him crazy" (386). Not only can the narrator use the language that Garp struggles to master as fiction writer, but he can also analyze from an objective distance.

Not unlike Garp's voice as we know it from his fiction, the

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narrator's voice is often comic and satiric. For instance, when Garp realizes that the old man he finds in the park is not the one who raped the young girl, the narrator describes the man as the one "whose mustache had been innocent" (145). In a satiric tone, the narrator discusses the effect of the car accident on Michael: "Helen may have supposed that biting off three quarters of a student's penis was fairly high on the scale of conceivable abuse to students" (270). Similarly, when Garp feels that he is finished as a writer but might be a marriage counselor, the narrator echoes Garp's comic idea by using that image of Garp in the chapter entitled "The Eternal Husband": "Garp the marriage counselor, full of advice" (183); and "The marriage counselor is the I'm-sorry man, like a doctor with bad luck—the one who gets to diagnose all the terminal cases" (183). But one of the narrator's favorite Garp-like touches is his use of Alice Fletcher's speech impediment: "Garp knew about writers who couldn't *white*" (154); "The good-byes that Garp imagined conducting with Alice were violent scenarios, fraught with Alice's incoherent speech and always ending in desperate lovemaking—another failed resolution, wet with sweat and sweet with the lush stickum of sex, oh yeth" (157); "Did Garp love Alice? Oh yeth" (157); and "She couldn't *thtop*" (158). Ironically, the narrator makes a point of letting us know that Garp's saying "I've *thtopped*" is a "short, cruel imitation of poor Alice Fletcher" (170).

When the narrator shifts into the present tense for the first half of the chapter entitled "Mrs. Ralph," he breaks most profoundly from the biography he began and adopts not only the voice of Garp's fiction but also its tense. Garp's "Vigilance," for instance, uses the present tense. The narrator's present-tense segment follows Garp's narration of Walt's bedtime dog story, in the chapter entitled "The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky." It is as if the tense shift were the narrator's response to his relative silence in that chapter (it takes less involvement to record his character's speech than it does to describe the character's feelings, thoughts, and actions). With the change in tense come a new perspective and voice. The segment opens with these metaphors: "Like a gunman hunting his victim, like the child molester the parent dreads, Garp stalks the sleeping spring suburbs, green and dark; the people snore and wish and dream, their lawn mowers at rest" (199). Clearly the suburban scene and the mock-heroic tone present an image that the writer of "Vigilance" might employ, but this voice is the narrator's. Indeed, in the opening paragraphs of the segment, the narrator makes the fabricator's language his own. For instance, he describes Mrs.

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Ralph's breath as "a startling mixture of a fresh-cut lawn and cigarettes" (200). The scene in her kitchen receives similar treatment:

There is a litter of dishes in the sink, a bottle of gin on the kitchen table, the sour smell of slashed limes. The cord to the overhead light . . . had been substantially lengthened by one sheer leg and hip of a woman's pair of panty hose. . . . The nylon foot, spotted with translucent stains of grease, dangles in the breeze above the gin. (200)

Secure in this voice, the narrator even invents a word: "In the blackened houses an occasional dog *snorfles*" (200). And, like a good fiction writer, the narrator makes sure he connects images in this segment with previous chapters. So we find that he returns to Garp as "the marriage counselor" (206), the "marriage-counsel man" (205). No longer does the tense separate the narrator from Garp's world, Garp's language.

Once Garp is shot, the narrator as biographer would have to depend on the words of those close to Garp to complete his life story. But the narrator as fiction writer does not have that limitation. In fact, he can apply imagination and phrase Garp's last thoughts, revealing his psychological affinity: "If he could have talked, he would have told Helen not to be frightened of the Under Toad anymore. It surprised him to realize that the Under Toad was very familiar—as if he had always known it, as if he had grown up with it" (575). The narrator pursues fictive techniques to such an extent that he even records Garp's thoughts in interior monologue: "Don't worry—so what if there is no life after death? There is life after Garp, believe me. Even if there is only death after death . . . be grateful for small favors. . . . Oh yeth, as Alice Fletcher would have said." (576). Certainly, the narrator has not used a biographical source for those words.

Yet in the final chapter, "Life After Garp," the narrator again employs a clearly academic language, ending his study in the biographer's language even though he has not always relied solely on biographical techniques. The first sentence of the chapter sets a tone for the conclusion of the text: "He loved epilogues, as he showed us in 'The Pension Grillparzer.'" The final chapter allows the biographer to discuss openly the conflict in Garp's writing between memory and imagination. Analyzing Garp's conflict, the narrator writes, "He had been too impressed by what he now called the 'mere accidents and casualties of daily life, and the understandable trauma resulting therefrom'" (405). In other words, he has been unable to leave his life out of his fiction. But his last work of fiction brings a clearer vision. Although Garp does not complete *My Father's Illusions*, the narrator tells

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us that "Because he was inventing a father, Garp felt more in touch with the spirit of pure imagination that he felt had kindled 'The Pension Grillparzer'" (405). Garp dies, then, on the verge of reaching his full growth as a writer.

As Irving's novel moves toward its conclusion, it becomes clear that Garp needs some of the language of memory in his fiction to make it vivid, and the narrator needs some of the language of imagination in his biography to make it whole. At first Garp uses imagination like an artist; at first the narrator uses facts like a biographer. Yet just as Garp progressively relies more on autobiography until it threatens to overwhelm his creative ability, the narrator relies more on fictional techniques until they threaten the factual account of the life he relates. Finally, both writers resolve their aesthetic conflicts. As a result, Garp's *Bildung* becomes a kind of return to where he began with "The Pension Grillparzer," in which he used imagination to control memory. And, conversely, the narrator returns to using memory to control imagination, his initial narrative stance. In this way, Irving shapes a narration that re-creates the hero's struggle between the forces of memory and imagination, a struggle that represents a large part of Garp's *Bildung* as a writer. But *The World According to Garp's* continual debate about the value of the two languages ends as it begins: in the dialogue between them, art finds its form.

After *Garp*, Irving continues his interest in the *Bildungsroman* as well as his interest in the relation between the story and its narration. In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving's first-person narrator seems to have learned Garp's lesson about using imagination when rendering the facts of one's life. In fact, when John writes, "But the first of my father illusions was . . ." (62), recalling the novel Garp is writing when he dies entitled *My Father's Illusions*, Irving seems to suggest a relation between these two fictional creations. Trained in the search for literary patterns and parallels, John extends that training to his life, which he presents as a "story," a fairy tale, to be precise. For instance, while the family's reading of *The Great Gatsby* might be a biographical fact within the realm of the novel, it is John's imagination that seeks out and establishes parallels between *Gatsby* and his father. And although his father has relatively little direct discourse in the novel, John, desiring to show him as the hero of the family tale, often "reads" him as a third-person omniscient narrator might:

Father looked at Franny. It reminded me of the looks he occasionally gave mother; he was looking into the future, again, and he was looking for forgiveness—in advance. He wanted to be

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excused for everything that *would* happen. It was as if the power of his dreaming was so vivid that he felt compelled to simply act out whatever future he imagined—and we were being asked to tolerate his absence . . . from our lives, for a while. (243).

John also analyzes other people in his life as if they were truly characters, rather than real people in the real life he purports to be telling. For example, after establishing the idea that the whores and the radicals in Vienna treated him well, John says that “despite their day-and-night differences, they bore more similarities to each other than *they* might have supposed” (221). But John’s vision of his life as a fictional construct prompts him not only to note but also to develop such similarities. With John as narrator, Irving provides, once again, a narrative that represents in its style the major concerns of the text, in this case the creation of a text that resembles a Gatsby-like American dream.

Cider House Rules, Irving’s next novel, centers on an entirely different set of motifs from his previous novels, but the tension between imagination and biography remains, along with the attendant narrative approach. Indeed, this text represents a combination of the techniques in *Garp* and *Hotel*. Just as the narrator in *Garp* quotes from Garp’s journal and Jenny’s novel, this third-person narrator regularly quotes from Dr. Larch’s notebooks, thereby layering a second voice into the text: “‘Here in St. Clouds,’ Dr. Larch wrote in his journal, ‘we have only one problem’” (34). This narrator also involves himself in the telling, showing his proximity by the use of exclamation marks and the adoption of the character’s language. Apparently enjoying Irene’s fear of her husband, who is unrecognizable either as himself or as a human, dressed as he is in a beekeeper’s suit, the narrator writes, “No doubt this was what had been molesting the hives! The ghost of a beekeeper of bygone days!” (156). And suspending time in order to heighten his images, this narrator, like the narrator of *Garp*, calls attention to his power over the textual world. At the end of chapter four we are shown by way of their shadows reaching across a field behind the orphanage that Homer is now taller than Larch. As if the narrator has stretched that image through space and time, several pages into the next chapter the station master sees “the towering shadows of Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells” (166). And just as John in *Hotel* explores the connections between his story and *Gatsby*, this narrator continually weaves in references to *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*, other novels in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, thereby establishing parallels between Homer and David, Wally and Steerforth, Melony and Jane, and Homer and

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Rochester. Combining the allusiveness to similar novels and the layering of narrative voices, *Cider House Rules* is evidence of Irving's continuing growth as a storyteller.

The narration of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Irving's latest novel, shows the author experimenting still further with the relationship between narrator and text. Owen, the focus of the first-person narrator's, Johnny's, memoir, is said to have an extraordinary memory, but memory is also the narrative method which shapes Johnny's text and adds layers to his discourse. In one example Johnny juxtaposes the town's production of *A Christmas Carol* and his memory of the baseball game that kills his mother. After quoting Christmas Past's warning to Scrooge, the narrator leaps into memory, writing, "With a shudder I realized that it had been *my father* in the bleachers—it had been *my father* she waved to the instant she was killed" (238). The number of pages given to the brief episode of his mother's death is inordinate to actual time, but memory works by selectively expanding and contracting time. Similarly expanded is the Christmas Pageant, in which Owen plays the Christ Child, and the *Christmas Carol*, in which Owen plays the Ghost of the Future, events which establish Owen's "special" quality. Irving's text gains another layer of memory, therefore another voice, when Johnny weaves more than twenty-five of his present-tense diary entries into his past-tense text. The three selves, shown in memories reached through events in the past time of the narrative, in memories reached through the present time of the narration, and in journals representing the present time of the narration, are juxtaposed via this narrative. The coexistence of those selves suggests the influence that the past has on the present and that memory has on the individual, major themes in the novel.

Irving's handling of the narration is clearly essential to his success as a writer. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the elongated layers of memory that are punctuated by diary entries provide the perfect narrative vehicle for a text concerned with time and memory. The power of the third-person narrator in *Cider House Rules*, as seen in the manipulation of time, the proximity to the characters, and the weaving in of journal entries, enables Irving to shift from subjective to objective vision, a movement that supports that novel's theme of one's responsibility to others. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* the first-person narrator's presumed task doesn't give him the power of the narrator in *Cider House Rules*, but he claims the freedom of a third-person narrator anyway, a fitting approach for his American fairy tale. As we have seen in some detail, the narration of *Garp* re-creates the character's conflict as a writer

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through its use of incorporated genres, manipulated tense, and shifting proximity to the characters. On the other hand, Irving's *The 158-Pound Marriage* lacks the techniques displayed in the other novels, resulting in a single-level narrative without the force to give substance to the characters portrayed. Yet in the earlier novel *The Water-Method Man* the mix of voices, incorporated genres, and tense shifts provides a suitably fractured surface with which to portray its main character. Even in his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, Irving found that incorporated genres present other voices that can serve any number of relationships to the main voice, allowing the novelist to accent theme through narrative style. Irving's power to create fascinating plots has long been accepted; these plots depend to a large extent, however, upon a handful of narrative techniques and the layers of discourse they bring to the text.

NOTES

¹ Lounsberry notes the literary excesses of "reality (nonfictional fact) and imagination (fiction)" in the novel (33).

² See Bakhtin's discussion of the three major means of stratifying the language of the novel: hybrid construction (304), character influence (316), and incorporating genres (320).

³ See Cosgrove for a different vision of Irving's use of these materials: "In remarkable and original fashion Irving uses quotations from Jenny's autobiography and her son's later writings to intrude comments on characters and events throughout the novel. These intrusions offer judgments which are often surprising and at odds with the present narrative, but which the reader is obliged to accept until he can know better" (53).

⁴ Doane and Hodges do not think that Irving's *Garp* finally supports the feminist ideals it contains. Using the same conflict that this chapter develops, they cite the fact that only Garp's male writing is imaginative, while all the female writing in the book, Jenny Fields's, for example, is "unlike art" because it "can only catalog experience . . . and render this personal experience in a literal-minded way" (67). Similarly, Carton writes, "The individuality of Jenny Fields—like every expression of what passes for feminism in *The World According to Garp*—finally accommodates rather than challenges a masculinist ideology and model of the self and reinforces the association of sex with violence on which it is based" (53).

⁵ Although Dickstein considers *Garp* weakened by Irving's lack of distance from the clearly autobiographically based character, he does credit Irving for these "big chunks of Garp's fiction" that "evidence more invention and less autobiography than Irving's own novel" (399).

⁶ In fact, Harter and Thompson provide convincing evidence that the narrator is Donald Whitcomb, the author of Garp's official biography *Lunacy and Sorrow* (87). Although I am satisfied with isolating the aspects of the narration in which the narrator uses the language of the biographer, without

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needing to identify him, I might add to their evidence the fact that Whitcomb is the only one whose death is not recounted in the epilogue to the book.

⁷ Cosgrove has a different interpretation of the narrator's manipulation, humor, and uncertainty: "The narrator does not seem sure whether the events are serious, or funny, or vulgar, or all three at once in the mode of black humor" (54).

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Filters, Portraits, and History's Mixed Bag: *A Lost Lady* and *The Age of Innocence*

JOHN J. MURPHY

It has always been surprising to me that Willa Cather's and Edith Wharton's lives failed to touch. They were born eleven years apart (1862 and 1873); their careers in fiction overlapped for more than three decades; two years separated their Pulitzer Prizes (Wharton's for *The Age of Innocence* in 1921, and Cather's for *One of Ours* in 1923); they both were Jamesians, Francophiles, shared acquaintance with fellow writers like Sinclair Lewis and Scott Fitzgerald; and they died a decade apart—Wharton in 1937, Cather in 1947. In a 1931 *Colophon* piece Cather admits trying to imitate Wharton's fashionable fiction before discovering her own home pasture in *O Pioneers!* (1913) (*On Writing* 93), and in a *New York Times* interview in 1924 she mentioned reading a Wharton article on France (*WC in Person* 70), but I find no other recognition. Neither in the R. W. B. Lewis biography nor in the collection of Wharton letters does the index include Cather; the exhaustive James Woodress biography of Cather includes only three entries under Wharton, and these refer to inclusions in lists of Cather contemporaries. Surely Cather must have read the 1921 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence*, which appeared when she was concluding *One of Ours* and before she began *A Lost Lady*. I begin with a question I can't answer: How much did Cather's reading of Wharton's masterpiece influence *A Lost Lady*? Questions like this can seldom be answered satisfactorily; however, the comparisons they generate do contribute understanding of the subjects, and placing these two novels side by side indicates significant similarities, if not influence.

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Cynthia Wolff's labeling Wharton's writing *The Age of Innocence* "a nostalgic act" (310) could easily be applied to Cather's writing *A Lost Lady*. Both novelists observe their subjects over the chasm left by the war in France. Wharton laments the losses of these years in her autobiography: "The brief rapture that came with the cessation of the war . . . soon gave way to a growing sense of the waste and loss wrought by these irreparable years. . . . I myself had lost a charming young cousin, Newbold Rhineland, shot down in an aeroplane battle in September 1917" (*Backward* 363-64). She then mentions the untimely death of a young American officer friend, Ronald Simmons, for whom she commissioned a vault in a Marseilles cemetery, and also the passing of older intimates Howard Sturgis and Henry James. In a spirit heavy with these losses she began writing about the war "with a new intensity of vision," she says. "A study of the world at the rear [she had lived in Paris during the war] seemed to me worth doing, and I pondered over it till it took shape in *A Son at the Front*" (368-69), a novel "intended as another wreath on Simmons' grave" (Lewis 457), which appeared, to mixed reviews, only in 1923. "Meanwhile," Wharton continues, "I found a momentary escape in going back to my childhood memories of a long vanished America, and wrote *The Age of Innocence*" (*Backward* 369). Lewis bluntly says that disillusionment with the contemporary American cad of the type she saw overrunning Paris after the war led her back to the world of her growing up and young womanhood, a nineteenth-century world she defined to Sara Norton as "a blessed refuge from the turmoil and mediocrity of today—like taking sanctuary in a mighty temple" (Lewis 423-24). But the writing was more than a refuge, notes Lewis; it helped her rediscover a vital continuity in herself after experiencing a cleavage from everything she had known and been—became, in effect, an "act of reconciliation. In *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton sought to come back to herself" (424-25).

At this point we are able to approach Willa Cather. In a brief prefatory statement in her 1936 essay collection, *Not Under Forty*, Cather wrote, "The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts, and the persons [like Flaubert's niece, and Mrs. Fields, Sarah Orne Jewett, Katherine Mansfield, and Thomas Mann] and prejudices recalled in these sketches slide back into yesterday's seven thousand years. . . . It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written." Woodress notes Cather's increasingly valetudinarian attitude from 1922 on, her disillusionment with the postwar Jazz Age, the callousness of prosperity—stingy, grasping, extravagant—and the lazy descendants of earlier generations (335-36). *A Lost Lady* is a product of

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- this watershed year and of nostalgia. The idea for the novel came to Cather during a Toronto stay with Isabelle and Jan Hambourg in the middle of the exhausting writing stint of her 1922 war novel, *One of Ours*, triggered by the death of her soldier cousin, G. P. Cather, and inspired too by the killing of talented young violinist David Hochstein. While in Toronto Cather read the obituary of Lyra Garber, former wife of early Nebraska Governor Silas Garber, personages from Red Cloud childhood days. Once *One of Ours* was finished, the new novel went quickly, was written in five months, and Cather returned to Red Cloud for her parents' golden anniversary and a family reunion, to reconnect with many friends among the immigrant settlers, and to be confirmed in the local Episcopal church. *A Lost Lady*, set "thirty or forty years ago, in one of those gray towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much grayer today [in 1922] than they were then," (9) recaptures the pioneer past of the 1880s and betrays a nostalgia for that past while continuing the harsh attack on American materialism evident in the more contemporary *One of Ours*.

The postwar, pro-pioneer attitudes in *A Lost Lady* can best be gauged by reading it alongside Cather's 1923 lament for the old days in the "These United States" series in Mencken's *The Nation*, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." The novel offers a summary of Captain Forrester's autobiographical narrative:

... a concise account of how he came West . . . and took a job as driver for a freighting company that carried supplies across the plains from Nebraska City to Cherry Creek, as Denver was then called. The freighters, after embarking in that sea of grass six hundred miles in width, lost all count of the days of the week and the month. One day was like another, and all were glorious; good hunting, plenty of antelope and buffalo, boundless sunny sky, boundless plains of waving grass, long fresh-water lagoons, yellow with lagoon flowers, where the bison in their periodic migrations stopped to drink and bathe and wallow. (52)

This passage serves as a concise account of "Nebraska; The End of the First Cycle":

When silver ore was discovered in the mountains of Colorado near Cherry Creek—afterward . . . the city of Denver—a picturesque form of commerce developed across the great plain of Nebraska. . . . One of the largest freighting companies, operating out of Nebraska City, in . . . 1860 carried nearly three million pounds of freight across Nebraska. . . . The oxen made from ten to twenty miles a day. I have heard the old freighters say that, after embarking on their six-hundred-mile trail . . . out

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in that sea of waving grass, one day was like another; and . . . all the days were glorious. . . . Along these trails were the buffalo "wallows"—shallow depressions where the rain water gathered when it ran off the tough prairie sod. . . . The freighters lived on game and shot the buffalo for their hides. The grass was full of quail and prairie chickens, and flocks of wild ducks swam about on the lagoons. These lagoons have long since disappeared, but they were beautiful things in their time. (236)

But, like *The Age of Innocence*, *A Lost Lady* is more than nostalgia. Woodress sees in it "a new note . . . Cather's implicit message that one must learn to live with change, adapt to new conditions, accept the inevitable" (348). Survival tactics, then, fuse with the reworking of historical periods in *A Lost Lady* and *The Age of Innocence*, as portraits of exceptional women of the past are managed from vantage points of less than exceptional, if sympathetic, men in their lives.

Cather confessed that her initial hurdle in *A Lost Lady* was point of view: "I discarded ever so many drafts, and in the beginning wrote it in the first person, speaking as the boy [Niel Herbert] himself. The question was, by what medium could I present her [Marian Forrester] the most vividly, and that, of course, meant the most truly. There was no fun in it unless I could get her [Mrs. Garber/Mrs. Forrester] just as I remembered her and produce the effect she had on me and the many others who knew her" (Woodress 340). The task was to accomplish "a portrait like a thin miniature painted in ivory." Wharton, too, made point of view the key; her "narrative vantage is carefully chosen," observes Wolff. "The narrator may step outside of Newland Archer's mind to make judgments or draw conclusions; but . . . the [old New York] world . . . becomes . . . a mirror of Newland's mind and the very condition of his being" (314). Merrill Skaggs's contention that in Cather's portrait of Marian we are given angles of vision on a woman who chooses to be a sex object (47–48) can be applied to Wharton's Ellen Olenska. And Hermione Lee's observation that Cather's novel involves "a sense of betrayal felt by and about the central figure" (193) can be applied helpfully to Wharton's. Indeed, Lee's definition of Marian Forrester and Myra Henshaw (*My Mortal Enemy*) as feminine rather than heroic is more applicable to Mrs. Forrester and Madame Olenska: "They have no children, they are separated from their family roots, they have no independent occupations, and they define themselves in terms of their relation to men. They are confined and thwarted, not expansive and self-fulfilling. Their energies are poured, not into something impersonal and bigger than themselves—the

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shaping of the land, the making of an art—but into personal feelings and self-expression” (193–94).

Like John Singer Sargent’s “Madame X” (Madame Pierre Gautreau), the portraits titillate while idealizing, a combination that leads the point-of-view males to feel betrayed by and then betray the reality of their fascinating women. What is satirized in each case is a young man shaped by the ideals of a society he views flatly and fails to understand. Wolff notes that Newland Archer’s literary dabbling merely contributes, due to his lack of occupation, to his fantasies and that his conformity prevents him from measuring his own society against his reading (315–16). This is also true of Niel Herbert, who condemns Marian Forrester vehemently five pages after we are told how in his reading “he was eavesdropping upon the past, being let into the great world that had plunged and glittered and sumptuously sinned long before little Western towns were dreamed of” (81–82). Newland’s reading prepares him as little for marriage as Niel’s prepares him for the shock of Frank Ellinger’s yawning laughter from Marian’s bedroom window. Newland’s contemplation of his bride-to-be, May Welland, from across the Academy of Music during a performance of *Faust* is a clear example of his shallowness as well as its undercutting by Wharton’s narrator: “‘The darling! She doesn’t even guess what it’s all about. We’ll read *Faust* together . . . by the Italian lakes . . .’ he thought, somewhat hazily confusing the scene of his projected honeymoon with the masterpieces of literature which it would be his manly privilege to reveal to his bride” (7). The ambivalence of all this is evident in Newland’s expectations in a wife of lily-of-the-valley innocence combined with the worldly wisdom of his ex-mistress. “How this miracle of fire and ice was to be created, and to sustain itself in a harsh world,” comments the narrator, “he had never taken the time to think out” (7). Similarly, after insisting on Ellen Olenska’s right to freedom and a divorce, he reflects that “nice” women “would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and generous-minded men were therefore . . . the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. . . . But here he was pledged to defend, on the part of his betrothed cousin, conduct that, on his own wife’s part, would justify him in calling down on her all the thunders of Church and State” (44). The same contradiction surfaces in Niel’s reflections on Marian before his discovery of her affair with Ellinger, in his recognition that his interest in her is, curiously, in relation to her husband, in her capacity for the sexual exploits she chooses *not* to have:

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He rather liked the stories, even the spiteful ones, about the gay life she led in Colorado, and the young men she kept dangling about her every winter. He sometimes thought of the life she might have been living ever since he had known her,—and the one she had chosen to live. From that disparity, he believed, came the subtlest thrill of her fascination. She mocked outrageously at the proprieties she observed, and inherited the magic of contradictions. (78–79)

Fascination is the bedfellow of suspicion at the dramatic heart of each novel, as their comparable winter scenes illustrate. In *The Age of Innocence* Newland follows Ellen to Skuytercliff, the van der Luydens' Hudson River estate, intercepting her on a snowy footpath returning from church. He has by this time compromised his belief in women's freedom by siding with the Mingott family against Ellen's divorce because he fears that her husband's charges concerning her infidelity, which she has failed to deny, might be true. At the same time his feelings for her are deepening, and he is excited, his gaze "delighted" by her red-cloaked figure, a "red meteor against the snow" (132). The scene is a brilliant Jamesian combination of picture, action, character, as, amid spurts of dialogue about her flight from New York, Ellen breaks into a race and Newland follows, meeting her panting and laughing at a park gate. The conversation that ensues, about her need to escape, he only partially fathoms. Then in the Patroon cottage, soon to be the setting of his honeymoon with May, their talk turns intimate, and his heart beats "insubordinately. What if it were from him that she had been running away, and if she had waited to tell him so till they were here alone in this secret room? . . . If the thing [declaration of love] was to happen, it was to happen in this way, with the . . . width of the room between them, and his eyes . . . fixed on the outer snow" (135). But as he waits, "soul and body throbbing with the miracle to come," the image of heavily-coated Julius Beaufort, a notorious rake later ostracized for financial dishonesty, appears in the window. Was Ellen running from Beaufort, or planning to meet Beaufort at the cottage? Newland's disgust propels him to St. Augustine to have May move up their wedding date because he mistrusts his feelings for her suspicious cousin. In *A Lost Lady* Marian takes Niel on a run down a snowy hill one night in the middle of her first winter confined to Sweet Water after the Captain's stroke. She tells Niel of her frustration and fear: "Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too, . . . and the next! What will become of me, Niel?" (77). Niel sympathizes, for this woman is the ideal he has worshiped since boyhood, and follows her

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down the drifts to the frozen creek as the clouds thin to reveal a new moon. But her exclamation that she has seen the moon over the wrong shoulders, shoulders not broad enough, hurts her self-appointed champion, who immediately recalls Frank Ellinger, about whose sexuality Niel "felt something evil" (46): "Instantly before his eyes rose the image of a pair of shoulders that were very broad, objectionably broad, clad in a frogged overcoat with an astrachan collar. The intrusion of this third person annoyed him as they went slowly back up the hill" (78).

Disillusionment puts an end to suspicion in both cases. For Niel it comes on the June morning when Captain Forrester is away in Denver heroically saving the poor depositors from ruin by ruining himself. Ellinger has come to Sweet Water, and Niel attempts to inspire distaste in Marian for this man by leaving roses outside her bedroom window:

As he bent to place the flowers on the sill, he heard from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy—ended in something like a yawn.

Niel found himself at the foot of the hill on a wooden bridge, his face hot, his temples beating, his eyes blind with anger. . . . In that instant between stooping to the window sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. (86)

Newland's disillusionment results in a fixed gaze at the Gorgon, the reality of Ellen and their situation. He pressures her at the train after her grandmother's stroke, and she bluntly asks if he would have her live with him as his mistress behind the backs of the people who trust them. Protesting that he wants to escape to a place beyond categories like mistress, she insists such places prove "little" and "miserable": "You've never been beyond. And I have, and I know what it looks like there" (290-91). Here is the confession of infidelity he has so long feared. After struggling out of May's brougham, the ironic setting of this conversation, Newland watches it roll away, noticing that his tears have frozen stiff on his eyelashes—he has had to look unblinkingly at the Gorgon. Disillusionment in this case causes recklessness rather than anger, merely increases Newland's compulsion to escape with Ellen. It is Ellen herself, May, and the clan that force his self-confrontation, his submission to the old New York values essentially defining him. According to Wolff, his reaction to May's craftily manipulated announcement of her pregnancy reveals his firm moral commitment: "Newland is restrained from leaving not by any objective and external

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force—but by the deep-rooted conviction that his own moral duty must ultimately be defined by family obligations” (327).

The lesson of both novels involves the complexity of history and society. Newland Archer's judgment of his society as he sits at the farewell dinner for Ellen, that it “dreaded scandal more than disease, . . . placed decency above courage” (335) is one-sided and superficial, and liberated Ellen herself replaces him as spokesperson for it: “It was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life looked cheap in comparison” (241). Newland's disgust at the dinner recalls Niel's during his last dinner at the Forresters', where the young men look puny to him in the chairs of the pioneers. His simplification about dreamers losing the West to his “generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times,” “who had never dared anything, never risked anything” (106–07), is the same kind of half-truth. Mrs. Beasley, Molly Tucker, and most of the folks who invade the Forrester place near the end are not the younger generation, and the affair with Ellinger that Niel discovered before he developed his theory on the decline of the West was not unknown or unacceptable to Captain Forrester. Financial dishonesty might not have been tolerated among the pioneer aristocracy or in old New York, but other immoralities were. “Morals were different in those days” (49), says Cather's narrator before describing Ellinger's scandalous activities with Nell Emerald and then his devotion to his invalid mother. Societies and generations are complex, contradictory.

As younger writers, Cather and Wharton might have simplified, positively or negatively, their generations and past generations, including the so-called heroic ones. Heroic decline in *A Lost Lady* is represented in the physical decline and heaviness of Captain Forrester, whose “features were running into each other, as when a wax face melts in the heat” (109), and whose “ruggedness had changed to an almost Asiatic smoothness. He looked like a wise old Chinese mandarin” (136–37). In *The Age of Innocence* matriarch Catherine Mingott's transformation “from a plump active little woman with a neatly turned foot and ankle into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon” (28) represents a similar passing. As one looked back over the chasm of the war, the terrain wrinkled into complexity and the expectations of youth seemed as elusive and illusive as they were precious. In Wharton's epilogue a mellow Newland Archer, widowed now after twenty-five years of faithful marriage to May, views the flower of life he had associated with Ellen as “so unattainable and

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improbable that to have repined [about missing it] would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (347). In the final coda of Cather's novel, a mature Niel, now "very glad that he had known [Marian Forrester] and that she had had a hand in breaking him into life," reflects on her laughing eyes, that

seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life. "I know where it is," they seemed to say, "I could show you!" He would like to call up the shade of the young Mrs. Forrester, as the witch of Endor called up Samuel's, and challenge it, demand the secret of that ardour; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting. Probably she had found no more than another; but she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring. (171-72)

Mature views have replaced green, resentful ones. Niel takes comfort in learning that Marian Forrester, the woman he had fled with "contempt for . . . in his heart" (*Lost* 169), had been well cared for during her last days; and he shares that comfort with Ed Elliot, now a mining engineer but previously one of those upstart boys Niel had associated with decline. Newland had long ago grown to recognize that the dull duty symbolized by old, innocent New York had preserved dignity and prevented life from becoming "a mere battle of ugly appetites" (347), yet he now concedes that "trenchant divisions between right and wrong, honest and dishonest, respectable and the reverse, had left so little scope for the unforeseen" (351), that "there was good in the new [turn of the century] order too" (349). *The Age of Innocence* and *A Lost Lady* are relatively brief novels, but they are big books and, I think, important ones in communicating the complexities of history, society, and human relationships. Comparing them at least makes this clearer.

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